

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE PRESCRIBED BURN

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Veda is a young Ukrainian-American woman from New Jersey who is creative, insightful, and observant. Her concerns are ordinary yet pressing, and she struggles with obsession, physical distance, and personal identity.

Though she loves home, life forces her to leave again and again. Veda is moved by Wildwood, the Pine Barrens, the PATH train, and the Meadowlands. Memories of her favorite landscape ground her, no matter where she happens to be.

Veda's parents are a steady, dependable presence, but her peer relationships are her greatest source of interest and inner conflict. Madsy is her best friend and confidante, Arthur is her first love, and Theo inspires such tumultuous passion that he nearly ruins her.

Art is her redemptive force. In order to grow, Veda must simultaneously destroy and create.

THE PRESCRIBED BURN

by

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
2009

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2009

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Welcome to America

Veda doodled on the skin of her bare thigh with the corner of the camp itinerary she held in her hand. She liked the way the light coming through the windshield of her parents' stationwagon caught her downy, blond leg hair, which stood out against the red lines she had drawn on her skin.

It was the last week of July, and Veda, Mama, and Tato were making the trip to East Chatham, NY for Ukrainian scouting camp. Veda sat in the front passenger seat because she was afraid to get car sick in the back. Mama was stuck next to Veda's teddy bear and the plastic boxes filled with clothes and supplies.

Reading over the camp itinerary, Veda couldn't wait for the day's activities, which included reuniting with Alex and Katya, her tent-mates and summer friends, and the *vatra*, or bonfire, at the end of the day. She could pass on afternoon mass, which meant she would have to wear her itchy, polyester scouting uniform. The last time she wore it was last summer, and she wasn't even sure if it still fit.

"Mama, what should I do if my uniform is too tight?" Asked Veda. "I probably should have tried it on before we left."

"Why, do you think you've gained weight since last summer?" Asked Mama. "Either way, you won't be wearing it that often. I'm sure you'll be fine."

Veda tried to remember the way her body looked a year ago and found it impossible to do. Her breasts must have grown larger, right? Wasn't that what breasts did? She may have gained a little weight, but her body was always fluctuating so much from periods and eating at sleepover parties with her friends that she could never really keep up with the changes.

Tato pulled into a gas station. Based on his attitude, the attendant must have serviced similar cars, bumper-stickered with yellow and blue Ukrainian flags and loaded with children and things for camp. He spoke slowly, emphasizing his words, as if accommodating his belief that Veda's dad didn't speak English.

"Welcome to America," the attendant said.

"Oh, we're from New Jersey," said Veda's dad, and Veda wondered if there was a way she could show how American she really was. Would a Jersey girl snap her gum loudly? Would she be wearing big hoop earrings? Veda looked through her hiking backpack but couldn't find a pack of gum. She was disappointed that she couldn't flaunt a big, pink bubble.

"I only accept American money. I definitely won't take rubles," said the man, unwilling to drop his joke. Veda thought about giving the station attendant some play money from the travel Monopoly game she had packed among her things, but she couldn't reach it since it was stored in a plastic container in the trunk. Tato just shook his head.

Full of gas, the stationwagon pulled onto a dirt road marked with a wooden sign that read "Wolf's Den," the name of the camp. Veda was always stunned when she saw the name in English because, once inside, she would only be able to speak Ukrainian.

Veda liked the challenge of having to speak Ukrainian for three weeks, but what she liked even more was the sneaky feeling she had when she and her friends whispered to one another in English in the loud dining hall or talked each other to sleep late at night.

They followed the road to the center of the camp, where the pool, sports field, infirmary, and dining hall were located. All the actual campgrounds, one for the girls under thirteen, one for the boys under thirteen, one for the older girls, and one for the older boys, were segregated. Veda always felt like the boy's camp was covered in a veil of mystery and excitement. The prospect of seeing boys was always a fun one; Veda pressed her face against the glass and hoped she would see someone cute.

"This place hasn't changed much," said Mama, pointing out the faded trail markers and chapel, with its bleached wood exterior, in the distance.

No one actually seemed to live in East Chatham except the squirrels, but Veda liked the sounds of things like locusts and the rustling of dry, overgrown grass, so different from the nature sounds she heard in her backyard in New Jersey. At her parents' house, the woods pressed up against a parking lot, and headlights shined through the trees at night. In East Chatham, she would be able to see the stars more clearly than from any other place she had ever been. She was looking forward to finding all the constellations she had learned in her 8th grade science class.

"I still think it's funny that we were here together once but didn't know each other then," said Tato, glancing at his wife in the rear-view mirror. Veda always admired the fact that her parents were raised in the same Ukrainian community and that they shared similar histories. Veda's own parents would recognize the other parents, who had once

attended this camp with them. Looking around at the cute boys carrying canoes and soccer balls, Veda wondered if one of those young men would one day marry her.

When Tato drove the stationwagon to the top of the hill, where the big girls camp was located, she saw all the other campers helping their parents unpack cars. Veda liked the sense of movement and efficiency, which would remain for the next three weeks. She was excited for marching and wake-up calls.

The girls carried plastic boxes that they would have to store under the cots in their tents, bags filled with bugspray and snacks, boxes filled with stationary, markers and stamps so they could write letters home and to their American friends and to crushes they had in their hometowns. The girls looked strong, even though their bodies were dwarfed beneath the large weight they carried into the campground.

Tato opened the trunk of the car, and Veda looked at the boxes packed tightly there. She realized that she didn't know where anything was because her mom was the one who had put everything carefully into the boxes and bags. They unpacked items like her sleeping bag, which she would use over the mattress on her cot, especially helpful when the nights got really cold and her scouting uniform, which was laid out neatly over the boxes, hanger still intact.

Shaded by pine trees surrounding a circular clearing were fourteen, green canvas tents, large enough to fit three cots in each one. The front flaps were pulled back by rope to reveal the insides, which were elevated from the soft, pine-needle covered ground by wooden pallets, the kind they used at the home improvement store so that the machines could move bundles of things easily around the store. If they followed a path about one hundred feet away from the tents, the girls would find two portable toilets and a small

barrack with showers, a large communal basin, and a circular basin with spigots.

Luckily, her tent was one of the furthest ones from the portable toilets, which meant that she wouldn't ever have to smell them.

"Veda, we missed you!" Said Alex, and she came out of the tent to greet Veda and her parents. Alex's skin was tanned, and she was wearing a tight, pink t-shirt with a rhinestone-studded peace sign. She was wearing short denim shorts, and it looked like she had tweezed her eyebrows because they were thin and severely arched. Veda was surprised because she remembered Alex's signature unibrow and the long, khaki cargo shorts she used to wear.

Veda wondered if she should have gotten a new wardrobe for camp; most of her t-shirts were leftovers from other camps, shirts that proved she had completed events like the Canoe Race and the Camp Olympics. Now, Alex's shorts were so short that Veda was embarrassed for her dad to be so near the tent. Her tanned legs would certainly attract attention.

Veda began to arrange her space in the center of the tent, with Alex and Katya's cots on either side of her. Alex's toiletries were scattered on top of her sleeping bag, and she was trying to arrange them as she talked excitedly about a formal dance she had attended. Veda noticed a can of pink shaving cream and a package full of disposable razors. Veda didn't think to put "razors" on the list of things that she would have to bring for camp this year. She stood on the side of the cot opposite Alex, to hide her legs, and was suddenly self-conscious, unrolling the sleeping bag, arranging her pillow and folding a small blanket that Baba had knit for her, at the base of the bed.

Veda sat on the bed and covered her legs with the small blanket, which was embroidered with red and black thread. She was looking forward to the twice-weekly lessons that would teach her how to make a similar blanket. Baba tried to teach her once, but her Ukrainian accent was so strong and the sewing terms so foreign to Veda that she had a hard time understanding. At least at camp, the people teaching the sewing lessons knew English as well and could help with anything that was unclear.

“Mama, I think I’m okay now. I can unpack the rest myself,” said Veda because she wanted to get her dad away from Alex and because she knew that Mama would probably frown upon Alex’s tight clothing and make-up.

“Are you sure? You have so much to unpack here,” said Mama. Veda shooed her mother out of the tent and nodded her head.

“I’ll be okay. I have to meet all the other girls, and it’s just going to be a busy afternoon. Alex and Katya can help me if I need anything,” said Veda, pushing her mom out of the tent and letting the flaps close behind them.

“Alex looks so different,” said Mama, lowering her voice to a whisper. “I don’t understand why she has to wear so much make-up for move-in day. It’s so hot, and her make-up will melt anyway. And what is with her shorts? Would you ever wear shorts that short?”

“I don’t think so, Mama. Don’t worry about it,” said Veda, not yet sure if she herself should be worrying about it.

She and Alex had so much fun in previous summers, especially when they made up funny songs. Last summer, Alex thought of a song about a pair of pink panties that someone had lost outside the barracks; the panties remained on the ground for days until

they saw a raccoon drag them away one night, when they were coming back from *vatra*.

Alex and Veda had laughed so hard about it that they decided to write the lyrics on special stationery and save the song in their memory boxes, along with all the photos they took with their disposable cameras.

“How do you feel about living in a tent this summer?” Asked Alex, when Veda re-entered the tent, trying to hide her legs in the shadows. She sat back down on the bed and watched Alex put away things like bags full of eyeshadow and a lacy bra while she herself covered her legs with her Baba’s blanket.

“I think it will be alright. I brought a few cans of Pringles to hold us over until the snack shop opens,” said Veda, opening one of the boxes that her mom had put under her cot. She still didn’t know where things like her flashlight and razor were located, but she knew exactly where she could find the Pringles.

In previous years, the girls had loved eating these potato chips, and they liked positioning the chips in their mouths so that they looked like they had duck lips. They would take lots of pictures of one another with the potato chip lips. The food at camp was always really disgusting so they lived on the snack foods that they hoarded in their tents instead. The only good meals were the ones where the kitchen staff served ham with pineapple and potato balls and frozen pizza rectangles, never the traditional Ukrainian food like *holubczy*.

“I’m actually on a diet,” said Alex. “I stopped eating Pringles. I think I can lose like five pounds, especially since we’re going to be spending all that time marching up that hill.”

Veda had always thought that Alex was beautiful and athletic looking. Alex was a swimmer and had strong upper arms and a pretty lean physique. Veda was shocked that Alex would think that she needed to go on a diet. Veda didn't even really know what a diet was. She imagined her mom's Jane Fonda exercise videos from the 1980s and the diet clubs that her mom used to attend when she was young. Diets seemed to mean spandex pants.

"Why in the world are you on a diet?" Asked Veda. "And how am I supposed to eat all these Pringles myself?"

"Just don't eat them, they're bad for you. You'll get cellulite." Said Alex. "That's a cool blanket, by the way."

Alex lifted the blanket from Veda's lap. Veda was mortified, even though she wasn't sure if Alex actually noticed the hair on her legs, since it was dark in the tent, and the sun wouldn't catch her blond hair like it had in the car. She wouldn't be able to do anything about it until she could buy a razor at the necessities shop, but she couldn't even remember if the shop sold razors. She was afraid to ask anyone if she could borrow a razor because they would find out she had never shaved.

Just then, Katya walked into the tent, letting in the sunlight and startling Veda. Katya was better friends with Alex than she was with Veda, but Katya had always been nice to Veda. Katya had blond hair, and Veda knew that Katya's older sister, who was also a counselor in the young girl's camp, was a model for a teen magazine. Veda didn't think Katya realized how pretty she was, which made her generally pleasant to be around.

"Hey Veda, when did you get here?" Asked Katya. "It's good to see you!"

The cans of Pringles were still on Veda's bed, next to the blanket still covering her legs. Katya unpacked some resistance bands from her hiking backpack and hung them neatly over the center wooden beam so that the rubber bands with handles hung directly over Veda's cot. Veda wasn't sure why Katya had brought them or what they were really used for.

"You brought Pringles? Why did you do that?" Asked Katya. "I'm on a diet. Alex and I already discussed this. We are going to help one another lose at least five pounds, and we're going to wake up early every morning to run sprints up the big hill."

"Yeah, I thought you guys liked Pringles. I'll get rid of them though, if they offend you," said Veda. "What are those for, by the way?"

"Oh, for our exercise program," said Katya, pulling a hot pink band down from its place and demonstrating to Veda how she could do leg lifts with the band under her foot. Katya's legs were completely smooth and evenly tanned. Veda was upset that no one had told her about these things before she had arrived. She didn't even have a sports bra with her, which meant she would have a hard time jogging with Alex and Katya if they asked her.

She wasn't sure if any of the other girls were dieting too, and she had no idea how to use resistance bands or what they were supposed to do. Also, Veda thought, between daily soccer games, sometimes mandatory mile runs, marching drills, walks up the hill to camp, swimming, Ukrainian dancing workshop, and the manual labor they would have to do to build the wooden fort outside their base camp, she couldn't understand why her friends would want to exercise any more.

She would have to find a way to prevent Alex and Katya from waking her every morning when they got up to do their run and wondered if she could take apart pieces of tampon to keep in her ears. Mama had given Veda tampons, to wear if she got her period and still wanted to go swimming, but Veda had only just gotten her first period a little over a year ago. She wasn't yet comfortable with the thought of tampons.

Veda just couldn't get the tampons to stay inside her, and she sometimes wondered if something was wrong with her insides. She could never insert the tampon far enough for it to be comfortable to wear, even when she tried to put it in the way the illustration showed, with one foot propped on the toilet. She would find a better way to use the tampons: as earplugs.

"Did you eat lunch yet?" Asked Veda.

"No, there's no time," said Alex.

"We have to be at mass in like a half hour, in full gear," said Katya.

Of course there was no time for lunch, thought Veda, who was hungry. She couldn't open the Pringles cans in front of her tent-mates because she didn't want to deal with their reactions and criticism, and she also didn't know where else she could get food in such a short period of time. She didn't need Alex telling her that her cellulite was growing on her thighs as she put each chip in her mouth.

In order to go to mass, all the campers had to wear the traditional Ukrainian scout uniform. For girls, this uniform included a long-sleeve, thick polyester, mocha-colored shirt, decorated with all the awards the scouts had won and the insignias that represented their hometowns and a darker brown knee-length skirt that was really itchy and hard to move in. The girls also wore brown knee-high socks in the summer or brown wool tights

in the winter and hiking boots. The boys got to wear olive green pants, which at this point only made Veda jealous. She wanted to cover her legs, which were now too pale, too fat, and too patchy with hair.

Veda's own shirt was not decorated with very many awards and pins because she had just been promoted to the older girl division a few months before. Her shirt from the younger girl division was covered with little things that she had gotten from camps and special events, but she wasn't allowed to put any of them on her new shirt. That rule made her feel cheated. Nothing that she had learned from her previous years was going to help her this year, she thought.

Veda was really nervous that some of her friends would see her legs when they were standing at church so instead of knee-high socks, she wore her brown wool tights, which she had brought with her in case they had to wear their uniforms on a chilly night. Veda would rather her friends ask her about her tights than her hairy legs; at least she could tell them that she forgot her socks. The weight of the penalty for wearing white socks was, for Veda, much greater than the explanations she would have to make for wearing wool tights on a ninety-degree day.

Veda had trouble buttoning her shirt, which pulled in at her hips and just barely fit her. Maybe she would have to join her friends on their morning runs, out of necessity. Veda pulled the brown wool tights on under her skirt while Alex and Katya changed with their backs to her. Neither of her tentmates noticed Veda's tights; Katya was busy fixing her makeup, which Veda had never seen her wear before, and Alex was applying a layer of clear polish to her pink manicure. When all three of them were ready, they met the

rest of the camp in the field, where they fell into formation and began the march to church.

“Why are you wearing tights?” Asked Katya, finally, once they were out in the clearing. “Are you crazy?”

“I couldn’t find my socks in time,” answered Veda. “My mom packed them away somewhere, and I don’t want to get in trouble for wearing sneaker socks.”

“That sucks. It’s really hot outside,” said Alex, overhearing Katya and Veda’s conversation. The girls lined up in two rows, as best as they could from tallest to shortest, with some minor variations in between. There were forty of them, and the leader of the camp, Commander Natalie, stood in the front. It was hot outside, Veda thought, and she was still really hungry since she hadn’t eaten lunch. The shirt scratched against her shoulder and chest, and she could feel sweat running down her back and over her bellybutton.

“Liva, liva, liva, prava, liva,” chanted Commander Natalie, who had a braid down to her butt that swung back and forth behind her as she chanted the Ukrainian words for left, left, left, right, left. When Veda and her friends were tired, they would fall out of rhythm and stop stamping their feet against the dirt ground. Enough girls were always stomping so that no one really noticed if a few stopped to rest for a minute or two. The train of girls sounded like a circus of drummers coming through the woods.

The land was actually very pretty, with rolling hills, patches of wild flowers, and trails. Many of the older Ukrainians that worked at the camp, in the dining hall and at the nurse’s house, often said that the camp reminded them of Ukraine’s Carpathian Mountains, which was supposed to make it beautiful. Veda didn’t know much about

these mountains because she had never visited them or any other part of Ukraine, but Baba had frequently told her stories about battles with beheaded Cossacks, wars, and bloody murder in the mountains. Whenever Baba told her those stories, Veda would complain to Mama about how gory they were.

The church was a wooden building with shingles on the roof and a dome on top with a cross at the tip. The older boys camp had already assembled itself in two rows on one side of the church, with the shorter boys shifted to the first row, facing the church. Veda wished she could get a glance at the taller boys, who she could imagine more easily as husbands. The boys that were her age still looked like they were kids, not teenagers.

“There are a lot of boys this year,” said Katya, standing next to Veda in line.

“Some of the taller ones are really cute.”

Veda began to feel dizzy, and her skin began to tingle as Commander Natalie directed the line of girls to a row perpendicular to the boys, facing the church. The skin beneath her collar began to itch, and she could feel her shirt sticking under her armpits. The younger boys and girls’ camps followed after a few minutes and stood opposite the older boys, on the other side of the church. Veda wished that she could be in the shade, where the younger kids were standing, but she was a big girl now and had to put up with it. Before the mass began, Commander Natalie observed the two rows of girls and stopped to look at Veda, who was in the row closer to the church.

“Where are your socks?”

“I couldn’t find them because I didn’t get a chance to unpack. I’m sorry,” said Veda. Commander Natalie couldn’t get mad at Veda because she wasn’t really violating

the uniform requirements, but she shook her head and gave her a look that made her think that Natalie wouldn't let her get away with it again.

When the mass finally started, the priest opened the front doors to the church and stepped out to greet the crowd of young people. He made the sign of the cross in front of him and blessed everyone in Ukrainian, welcoming them to summer camp. An altar boy, one of the boys from the older boys camp dressed in a metallic embroidered coat, brought out the incense holder. The priest shook it in all directions so that the air around the church filled with frankincense. Veda began to feel nauseous, and she looked behind her to see if there was anyone she could talk to.

"Are you okay?" Katya asked.

"I don't know," said Veda, but she did know that she wasn't feeling good at all. She just didn't want to trouble anyone and interrupt the priest's opening remarks and prayers. The perimeter of her vision began to go black, and she felt her hands tingle. She had never felt so horrible in her life, and she wished that her parents were still with her and not on the New York Thruway, driving back to her home in New Jersey. Suddenly, the ground began to tilt, and she felt like she couldn't stand up anymore. Her legs began to shake.

Veda fell out of line. Commander Natalie took one look at Veda, who was pale as a ghost, and asked her to sit down against a tree trunk in the shade. Everyone seemed to turn around and shift their focus to Veda, who was just trying not to lose consciousness. Ms. Margaret, the camp nurse, removed Veda's tights and hiking shoes.

When Veda fully realized that her legs were bare, she sat up straight and crossed them underneath her. Eventually, she relaxed, because she didn't think she had to look

okay in front of Ms. Margaret, one of her friend's moms, and Commander Natalie, who was not very feminine-looking herself, despite the braid. Ms. Margaret brought Veda a wrapped cookie and a juice box that she kept just for these types of incidents, which seemed to happen often, especially given the heat. This was the most comfortable and relaxed Veda had felt all day, even though she felt ill.

“Do you want to go back to your cot and lie down? You probably just need to relax. You must be tired from unpacking,” said Ms. Margaret.

Commander Natalie drove Veda to the top of the hill in the camp Jeep and promised she would stay in the commander barrack while Veda rested in her tent. If she didn't feel well again, Veda could just go see Commander Natalie, who would be making behavior and performance charts for each tent.

The first thing Veda did when she got to the tent was eat half the container of Pringles because she was so hungry still. She couldn't wait for dinner. She didn't care what Alex and Katya thought at this point because the growl of her stomach drowned out any doubt that Veda had about her body image.

Veda had to get to the bottom of all these changes. When she was in her tent, she went through Alex and Katya's drawers, searching for their disposable razors. In the meantime, she found their raspberry and pear scented-shaving cream and, in the box where Alex used to keep her and Veda's pictures, letters, and song lyrics, Veda found a picture of Alex with a cute boy who held her tightly around the waist. Veda felt betrayed by her friend and wanted to be part of the world that she occupied. Alex and the cute boy looked so happy in the picture.

Veda pulled the resistance band and began to pull the handles apart, a movement which made her shoulders burn. She thought about running away while no one was here, but she would probably get lost and be forced to ask the ignorant gas station attendant for help on her way out of camp. She took one of the disposable razors out of the now-open bag on Alex's bed and hid it under her pillow, feeling a rush from stealing something from her friend.

She decided to write a letter to her mom with the stationary she could find, but the other girls walked in from mass just then, interrupting her writing.

"Veda, are you okay? We were so worried about you," said Alex. "We saw you fall and then Ms. Margaret and Commander Natalie took you away and moved you to a tree, but we didn't know what happened."

"Yeah, it's probably because I didn't eat," said Veda, hoping that Alex would understand what a bad idea it was to be dieting.

"And the tights you were wearing. Don't ever do that again," said Alex. "You can borrow my socks if you want."

"Who are you writing to?" Asked Katya.

"A cute boy from home," said Veda.

"Oh, tell us!" Said Katya.

"Maybe later," said Veda. "I just want to take a shower so badly. It's been such a long day."

"I'll come too," said Alex. "I want to get ready for *vatra*. There were a lot of really cute boys at mass today, and I can't wait to see them later tonight."

Veda didn't understand why Alex would want to see more cute boys when she had one to herself, but she couldn't ask Alex because she wasn't supposed to know about it. Did Alex tell Katya the story? Maybe they thought that Veda wouldn't understand.

In the younger girl's camp, Veda was never able to get a good shower because she and a buddy had to shower together, with bathing suits on. When they were ready to wash their private parts, they would politely have to ask their shower buddy to look away. The one good thing about big girl's camp was that they could find their own time to shower, and they didn't have to share.

Veda carried her shower caddy, with the stolen razor hidden beneath her washcloth. Alex positioned herself at the circular basin that baffled Veda. She had a towel wrapped around her and her foot propped up on the inside of the basin, with her other foot on the floor and her left hand balancing herself on the water spigot. Veda could see the can of shaving gel that she held. Alex squeezed it and made a pink line down the front of her shin, then she lathered it up to cover her whole leg.

Now Veda understood. She was sure that the basin wasn't built specifically for the purpose of leg shaving, but the girls had made good use of it. Veda closely observed Alex's method and noticed the way she started at her ankles, very carefully, worked her way up to her knee, moved over her knee, and then quickly shaved her thigh, ignoring the back of it.

"Alex, did you dance with any boys at your school formal?" Asked Veda. "I want to hear the story."

"Yeah, this boy from homeroom asked me to go with him, and we kissed in the phone booth afterward. He was really sweet," said Alex. "Have you kissed a boy yet?"

Before Veda could answer, Alex yelled and saw that she cut a scab on her leg with the razor. The scab opened, and blood ran down the front of the leg quickly since the water was warm and shone brightly against the white foam. Alex's blood swirled around in the circular washbasin with the water until it disappeared in the drain. Veda thought it was disgusting and couldn't imagine sticking her foot in a bloody basin like that. The other girls must cut themselves too.

Alex seemed to have forgotten the question. Veda wasn't even sure if she wanted to shave her legs and go through the bloody ritual that Alex had just performed in the basin. Instead, she showered quickly and was relieved that the temperature outside had cooled down enough to allow her to wear pants to dinner and then to the *vatra*. At least for now she didn't have to worry about her legs. She could get away with them for a little while longer.

During Veda's walk back to the tent, she noticed a pair of panties, partially covered with pine needles and dirt, on the ground. These panties were not like the pink ones that her and Alex once sang about. These panties were black satin with a little leopard print bow and mesh details at the leg openings. Veda wondered why anyone would bring panties like this to wear in the woods. In another tent, she heard one of senior campers ask her friends what had happened to her special sexy underwear, which she had misplaced, and Veda decided she should just get used to her surroundings.

When Veda opened the flap, she saw that both Katya and Alex were sitting on her bed, each with a can of Pringles in hand, their oily fingers covered with crumbs. Not only were they eating from the container that Veda had started and left on her bed, but the two girls had dropped grease and crumbs on Baba's blanket.

“What are you doing? Why are you eating those without me?” Asked Veda. “I thought you were on diets! You said eating Pringles would give me cellulite.”

“Whatever,” said Katya. Alex shrugged.

Veda looked at her friends with disgust. She noticed the crumbs gathering on the front of Katya’s black t-shirt and the way the oil glistened around the outside of Alex’s mouth, like garish lip gloss against her freshly-washed skin. Tiny shards of potato chips had fallen on Baba’s blanket. Perhaps Veda still felt sick from earlier, but the smell of the Pringles suddenly revolted her and made her want to vomit.

“Fine, we’re even. You stole my Pringles, and I stole your razor,” said Veda, who wasn’t going to live the next three weeks in misery. “Will you show me how to shave my legs?”

The Burn

“Charge the net,” shouted Buck. “Be more aggressive.”

Veda’s forehand was graceful, her backhand made perfect topspin, and her serve was lethal, but Veda couldn’t figure out how to forget about technique and simply unleash her fury on the court. For years, she had spent so much time working on her strokes that she wasn’t sure how to play them out in a way that would help her win matches and make Saint Margaret’s varsity team.

She was frustrated with herself for not being able to let go of everything that Buck had taught her. Veda desperately wanted to trust her competitive instincts.

“Veda, you have to charge the net!” Buck yelled from the other side of the court. His shorts were so short that sometimes Veda had a difficult time concentrating. His white legs were more visible than the neon green ball. “It’s like you’re so impressed with your own freaking forehand that you stand there admiring it instead of thinking about your next move.”

“There’s just so much to remember,” said Veda. “I’m putting so much pressure on myself that I can’t just do it. I can’t just play.”

“Listen, you’ve been taking lessons with me for six years. I think at this point, you should feel pretty confident about your technique,” said Buck. “Trust it. Stop thinking so much about the movement and focus on the win.”

“I have a lot of other stuff on my mind too,” said Veda. “Like, for one, I hate school, and trying to make varsity is pretty much my only hope.”

When Veda’s parents forced her to go to an all-girl’s Catholic school, after she had attended public school her whole life, she was furious with them. They thought she would receive a better education with the nuns on the hill, but all Veda could think about was the friends she was leaving and the uniforms she would have to wear. She was also mad because if she had gone to public school she probably would have made the varsity cut, but the competition at St. Margaret’s was too tough, since most of the girls were from families wealthy enough to afford to send their daughters to fancy lessons and camps.

“So play more tennis and worry less about school,” said Buck. “You know you can always come here.”

“Yeah, but my parents can’t afford to send me here all the time, especially since they’re paying private school tuition now,” said Veda.

“You could work at the front desk and get a discount,” said Buck. “I know Sally is looking for someone to cover afternoon and evening shifts. Then you could be here all the time. You could even do your homework, when it’s slow.”

Veda had never considered it before, but now she wondered if working at the Burn could be possible. She was sixteen, and she had never worked before. Maybe it was time for her to get a job, she thought. Maybe Veda would meet cute boys too, which

would be a perk, considering that she now attended an all-girl's school and had pretty much no interaction with the opposite sex. Maybe she would meet her future husband playing tennis, like Mama had. Veda's parents met at a mixed-doubles tennis mixer for the Ukrainian Club at Rutgers University. Surely, tennis courts were hot-beds for romance.

“Okay, I’ll consider it,” said Veda.

After the lesson was over, Buck introduced Veda to Sally, the fitness services manager and the only female personal trainer at The Burn. Sally had blond hair with even blonder highlights, green eyes, tanned and taut skin with freckles on her arms, and she always wore large diamond stud earrings. Sally had a diamond encrusted eternity band and a two-carat diamond princess cut engagement ring, which always caught the fluorescent light in the gym. Sally was married, but Veda knew that many members gossiped about the possibility that Sally and Buck were sleeping together. She heard this from the ladies in the bathroom.

“I’m interested in working as a front desk attendant,” said Veda. “I’ve been taking lessons with Buck for years and already know the basics. The club is open from five to ten every day, and the courts are rented by the half hour and the hour. I know the front desk person answers phones too.”

“Wow, I’m impressed that you know so much,” said Sally, smiling. “Come in on Monday after school, and we’ll train you.”

On Veda's first day working at The Burn, Sally showed Veda everything she would have to know about handling the front desk, which entailed more than Veda initially thought. Veda had to answer phones, check in members at the front desk, wash

and fold towels for the members, schedule tennis court time, make regular and decaffeinated coffee, collect payments, fill the vending machines when they were empty, sell gym memberships, straighten and vacuum the tennis waiting room, wipe down the gym machines, and straighten the magazines on the magazine rack. In exchange for this, she would be paid six dollars an hour, be able to use the gym for free, and receive discounts on her tennis lessons and court time.

“Here is a binder that will tell you everything you need to know,” said Sally, her bicep bulging under her short-sleeve trainer shirt as she handed Veda a black binder with a mess of laminated pages. “You’ll find instructions for everything. Oh, and you might have to wipe down the toilets in the ladies room, if they get really dirty.”

“I don’t know how I’m going to remember all this stuff,” said Veda. “It seems like a lot. Am I going to be working alone?”

“Well I’m usually here until five, so our shifts will overlap. And when you close, Buck will be here finishing up his late lessons.”

“Okay, this just seems like a lot.”

“Tonight, I will stay late for you,” said Sally.

Veda really admired Sally. She always seemed cool, calm, and collected: a real strong woman. She liked the sleek lines of Sally’s arms, her cut calves, and her small waist. She thought that Sally had a perfect body, with the look of a full-time lifeguard on the West coast. Rumor was that Sally ran nine miles every morning to stay in shape, and Veda could not fathom running that far or even having the patience and mental discipline to do so. Veda hoped that one day she too could have the stamina to do a daily nine-mile run.

Sally gave Veda an official work shirt that she would have to wear while she was on shift. Great, she thought, she would get to wear another uniform. Uniforms at school and uniforms at work. The uniform shirt was gray and had a picture of a large flame on the back. Right above her right breast, the embroidery read The Burn Tennis and Fitness Center. The shirt was three sizes too big for Veda, and it hung over her frame like a bad costume. She slipped it on over the t-shirt that she usually wore under her school shirt and stood in front of Sally, with her tight, form-fitting workout wear. Veda felt uncomfortable and awkward.

“Do you have anything smaller?” Asked Veda. She wondered if Sally thought that this size would actually be good for Veda’s body and if Sally really thought Veda was that large. She liked the shirt, though. It was flashy and would let everyone know that she worked at the club. People would ask her questions and treat her like an official resource. She might even keep the shirt on when she went home at night to show off to everyone that she had a job. “This is way too big for me.”

“Oh, I’m not sure we have a smaller size,” said Sally. “I could order some, but can you deal with this one for now? We need to make sure that our customers know you work here.”

“Yes, of course,” Veda said. Since it was the first job that Veda ever had, she really wanted to make sure that she was fulfilling her responsibilities and wanted to impress her boss. She wanted to be the best employee ever to work at The Burn Tennis and Fitness Center. She was going to bring the employee manual home and study it harder than the books for her new classes at Saint Margaret’s. In just a few weeks, she

promised herself, she would know the location of every piece of neon tennis ball fuzz on the tennis courts.

Buck was on break between lessons, and Veda caught him looking at Sally's butt and smiling to himself, even though he thought no one was looking. He was wearing a polyester warm-up jacket, short white tennis shorts with high socks, and blindingly white tennis sneakers. Under the jacket he had a polo shirt, and his dark chest hair was sticking out in a tuft. His hair was messy, and his eyebrows were perfectly groomed, like they had just been waxed.

"So now that you'll be able to afford more tennis lessons, we should schedule more sessions," said Buck. "You want to make varsity, right?"

"Sure, if I have time," said Veda. "I don't know when I'll have time to do my homework, now that I'll be working so much."

"You'll have plenty of time," said Buck, in between bites of a chocolate protein bar. Veda never saw Buck eat real food; he only ate meal replacement bars. He was washing down each bite of the protein bar with a cup of coffee in a styrofoam cup. Buck probably lived on coffee and protein bars, and Veda wondered if that was how all athletes sustained themselves.

"Do you think I would be a better tennis player if I started eating protein bars like you?" Asked Veda.

"Well, my secret is chocolate cake, but most people don't know that," said Buck, while taking a bakery box out of the mini refrigerator and cutting Sally and Veda pieces of chocolate cake, which he placed on paper plates they kept behind the desk. "Other people rely on steroids, but you didn't hear that from me."

“This looks really delicious,” said Sally, taking the plate with the piece of cake on it, even though Veda could tell she didn’t really mean it. When Buck walked away to get a check from his student, Sally took a bottle of creamer from the mini fridge and some packets of ketchup and poured both on top of the cake, laughing, but not too loudly so that Buck wouldn’t hear. “Doesn’t look that good anymore, does it.”

Veda watched Sally in awe as she bent the paper plate in half, crushing the slice of cake in between the two sides. She threw the piece of cake in the trash and pushed it deep into the garbage with a paper towel. Veda had never seen anyone destroy a perfectly good piece of food for the sake of not being tempted by it. However, she really wanted to impress her new boss so she took the creamer and the ketchup and did exactly the same thing. She crushed the chocolate cake between the two sides of the folded paper plate and threw the trash on top of Sally’s covering it with a paper towel, just to make sure Buck wouldn’t see what they had done.

“Now that is how you resist chocolate cake,” said Sally.

Veda had not realized that people who worked at the gym were so obsessed with nutrition and dieting. All the other front desk staff members had normal bodies, and they looked like normal people. No one seemed to be an extreme dieter or exerciser; in fact, Veda never really saw any of them take advantage of their free gym memberships and tennis court time discounts.

“So, how was the cake, ladies?” Asked Buck, when he came back.

“Luscious,” said Sally.

Just then, a young man looking to sign up for a membership walked up to the front desk. He introduced himself as Arthur, and Veda thought he was cute. She

couldn't wait until she had more responsibility and could actually talk to prospective members. Sally excused herself and directed the man to her office to tell him more about the membership packages.

"Am I going to be able to handle all this?" Veda asked Buck, once Sally was gone. She could feel herself sweating under the baggy oversized shirt, even though it was otherwise air-conditioned in the room; her feet, which dangled off the chair, were cold, and she was tempted to walk a mile on a treadmill to warm her extremities and ease her nerves.

"You'll be okay," said Buck. "You'll learn quickly. I bet you're smarter than most of the other people that work here, anyway."

"Am I allowed to go out for a dinner break?" Veda asked Buck. His protein bar and the perfectly good cake that she had just ruined were actually making her hungry. He shook his head and pointed at the vending machine.

"Sometimes they have leftover bagels from the morning. Other times you might get lucky and be able to mooch pizza off the kids that are perpetually waiting for their parents. Or, you could always get a protein bar," said Buck.

Now Veda understood why Buck never ate real food; it was because he never had a chance to leave the club since he was there all day teaching lessons or supervising clinics. Veda would probably bring snacks or frozen meals from then on.

She noticed that the towel bin next to the front desk was almost completely filled to the top with dirty towels. She would have to empty the bin and wash the towels otherwise the members would be annoyed that no clean towels were available. They

were gross-looking towels, all just a bit off white in color with yellow golden stripes down the center.

“Did you know that the towels are actually advertised as Ugly Towels in the fitness supply catalogue?” Asked Buck. “I always thought that was funny. I never use them. I have my own supply of chenille towels in the office.”

Sure, the fact that they were ugly meant that people wouldn’t steal them, but Veda had to deal with the towels that had been used over and over by sweaty people. She dragged the towel bin to the laundry room, which was hidden in a closet in the corner of the waiting room, and she reached her hands into the bin to pull out armfuls of towels to stuff into the washing machine. She imagined the old men wiping their sweaty crotches with the towels. She wished she had put on a pair of latex gloves from the first aid kit before deciding to reach into the towel bin, which also smelled like a wet mop that had been sitting in a dark closet for too long. When she was done stuffing the washing machine, almost too fully, she thought, she closed the laundry room door and asked Buck to cover the desk while she went to the ladies room to wash her hands.

The ladies room was more like a lounge than a restroom, the kind Veda might enjoy in an upscale department store, with plush couches, large well-lit mirrors, flower arrangements, potpourri bundles, and complimentary amenities like shampoo and hair dryers. Veda turned on the faucet, and the water emerged in a light spray; the liquid soap smelled like lavender, and the potpourri emitted the scent of vanilla musk.

When she looked up in the mirror to inspect her face, she saw behind her a completely nude elderly woman, sitting in a chair that she must have pulled up to the entrance to the sauna. A pile of clothes and a massive, crocodile-skin purse lay on the

floor beside her. She looked like she had been crying, and her long, grey hair was tied in a braid that fell over her right shoulder, just covering her sagging breast.

Veda turned around and was shocked to see the woman in all her glory. A mess of gray pubic hair overtook the woman's lap, and her legs seemed so atrophied that her thighs sunk into them, her knees knobby and bony. The blue veins bulged out of her legs as if something lived beneath her skin that was not her own. She was slim, but the fat in her tummy rolled over onto her pubic bone, and her belly button was stretched and oval-shaped. The woman had her hands at her sides, gripping the underside of the chair seat and biting her lip as she tried to stand up.

"Do you need some help?" Asked Veda, remembering that she was an employee, not a patron, and standing up straight to show off her baggy employee shirt which she realized, while looking in the mirror, made her look either obese or like a little girl playing dress-up. She couldn't decide.

"I just want to get into the sauna, dear," said the elderly woman. "Will you help me? I was getting undressed, but when I bent over to untie my tennis shoe, I hurt my back."

Veda couldn't remember if Sally had listed anything like this in her job responsibilities. She didn't mind helping anyone, but she felt really embarrassed looking at a completely naked old woman, whose body was unfamiliar to Veda. It was unlike her own body, which was smooth and had no fat rolls, and Veda's legs were white without blue veins. Veda knew her own body well, and she wasn't afraid of women with similar bodies. But this woman had a very unfamiliar body, and she didn't want to touch her arm or risk hurting her further.

“Don’t you think it might be better for you to get dressed and go home and rest, if you hurt your back?”

“My husband dropped me off. It’s my birthday. I wanted to have a spa day so I told him to drop me off here,” said the woman. “I think the sauna will help my back.”

“But this isn’t a spa,” said Veda.

The woman didn’t seem to care so Veda decided to do what she asked, especially since it was her birthday. She held the woman’s hands and helped her stand up; she was much lighter and more slight than Veda had initially guessed. Once the woman was standing, Veda tried not to look at her, and she opened the sauna door for her.

When the woman turned around to enter the sauna, Veda caught a glimpse of the woman’s butt, which was completely bony, with the skin hanging over her tailbone. Veda tried to keep smiling and not to grimace. The woman sat down in the sauna, and Veda turned the thermometer to what she thought might be a comfortable temperature for the woman, but she was not pleased for having to do this.

Veda ran to the front desk and hoped that Buck hadn’t abandoned it because she had been gone for so long. He was still there, but not behind the desk. In the interim, he had started to show a teenage boy a price chart for lessons. She couldn’t blame Buck for doing his job, but Veda didn’t want to get in trouble for leaving the desk. Sally was still in her office, laughing with the young man who was interested in purchasing a membership. They looked like they were filling out paperwork.

“Sorry to interrupt you. Was everything okay at the desk?” Asked Veda.

“Yeah, the phone rang a few times, but I covered your back.”

“When you’re done with the customer, can I ask you something?”

Veda wasn’t sure how long she should leave the old lady in the sauna or if she should attend to her at all. Veda had not yet gotten a chance to study the company handbook, but she did know that the ladies room was not a spa and that she was not in charge of providing a spa experience for anyone. She was not sure why any man would leave his wife at the club to enjoy her birthday alone, and she didn’t know how to handle the situation, especially since she didn’t think the woman was well enough to sit in the sauna by herself.

Buck finally finished with his customer and took an energy drink from the micro fridge. He was supposed to be teaching a lesson, but the lesson must have been a no-show so he was just hanging out, watching prime-time television and snacking on engineered food.

“So I went into the bathroom, and an elderly woman was sitting completely naked in a chair by the sauna,” said Veda. “She wanted me to help her get into the sauna because she hurt her back taking off her shoe.”

“Why was she completely naked?” Asked Buck. “And did she look good?”

“Well, first of all, I was a little disgusted by the whole thing,” said Veda. “But the really weird part is that she said it’s her birthday, and her husband dropped her off to enjoy a spa day for herself.”

“I don’t think we allow that,” said Buck. “It could make us liable for her safety. Do you even know if she’s a member here?”

“I didn’t get her name,” said Veda.

“Well, go find out,” said Buck. Veda had to go back into the ladies room and find out the woman’s name and whether or not she was a member. Now a group of middle-aged tennis ladies with their skirts were standing around the sauna, asking the elderly woman questions. She was in the sauna, in all her naked glory, sitting back on the wooden bench and relaxing. They were having an open conversation, and no one seemed to really notice or care about the fact that the elderly woman was naked.

“Excuse me,” said Veda to the three women who were standing there. They all had their hair elaborately curled and rolling over their shoulders like women about to attend a wedding, despite their athletic gear and obvious intention to play tennis. She was trying to use the nicest, most polite voice that she could muster, and she stood up straight and tall to show the authority represented by her t-shirt. “I just wanted to get her name so that I could check her into the club.”

They all looked at Veda in shock, and one of the women even brought her hand to her mouth as if she were trying to stifle a scream.

“Are you serious?” They asked. “Jasmine used to work the front desk here, years ago when the club first opened. She did it after retirement as a way to stay active and social. We haven’t seen her in so long!”

“What? What’s Jasmine’s last name?” Asked Veda. But the women were too busy fawning over Jasmine and helping her with a towel to pay any attention to the lowly front desk girl, who was just trying to do her job. She went back to the front desk to report to Buck about the situation, which wasn’t looking good.

“So apparently the old lady in the sauna is a familiar face. Some women recognized her. They wouldn’t let me ask her any questions,” said Veda.

“Did you find out anything about her?” Asked Buck, in between sips of his energy drink. Veda could tell that he was getting a little antsy, and he was looking around, his eyes darting to various points in the waiting room. “Did you get a name or anything?”

“She used to work here. That’s what the women told me, that she worked here when the club first opened, that she was the friendly lady who opened the gym in the morning,” said Veda.

“I wouldn’t know. I wasn’t around back then. I was still in college probably, whooping ass in D one tennis,” said Buck, laughing and picking up his tennis racquet from the leather couch to go through the motions of a serve. “She can’t just come in here though, if she’s not a member. Even if she used to work here.”

“Maybe I should interrupt Sally?” Asked Veda.

“You could try,” said Buck. “Did you have dinner yet? Want to try one of my protein bars?”

Veda could tell that she was going to have to assimilate into gym culture very quickly. She could see why people who worked here full-time were so devoted to the lifestyle because it sucked them in, in a way. The other part-time front desk kids might not live the gym life, but Veda really wanted to make a good impression on Sally and Buck and everyone else, even the tennis ladies with their skirts and attitudes. She wanted to start working out harder, training for tennis, and becoming a better player. She would make The Burn her second home, just as many of the after-school clinic kids did.

“Sure, I’m going to need the energy to deal with this mess,” said Veda.

Veda took a bite of Buck's protein bar, and her immediate reaction was disgust. It tasted completely artificial, like she was chewing on a block of compacted cigarette ash and that special black soap they used in art class to wash off tempera paint. Veda was just going to have to get used to this.

Armed with the information that the women in the bathroom had provided and the energy from the protein bar, Veda began to rifle through the binders beneath the front desk. She thought the oldest-looking binder, the one with the plastic peeling up from the corners, would be the most help to her. Indeed, there were notes in it from someone named Jasmine Watson, in very neat script: something about accounting and counting the drawer. The paper was crinkled and yellowed at the edges.

Sally hadn't showed Veda how to use the computer system yet, but she clicked the cursor a few times and figured out how to enter a member's last name. Watson, Watson. Yes, an elderly man by the name of Watson was definitely a member, but Jasmine was not. She would call Bill Watson and ask him to come pick up his wife since she was not a member.

Veda didn't care that this woman used to work at the front desk; she had no business using the sauna at The Burn, and Veda was fearful for her because she looked so fragile. However, she was sincerely jealous that Jasmine received so much attention from the tennis ladies in the bathroom. Veda wondered what she could do as a front desk attendant that would make other people admire her and want to be her friend. She wanted so badly to be part of the scene.

It took Veda a few tries to work the phone correctly because she needed a special code to dial, even for a local call, but she found the code scribbled on a post-it note on the

computer screen. She was proud of herself for learning all these things without even having to ask Sally.

“Mr. Watson?” Asked Veda, when the man picked up the phone. “Hi, this is Veda from The Burn Tennis and Fitness Center. I’m just calling to let you know that your wife is ready for you to pick her up.”

He coughed and didn’t argue. He told her that he was on his way and figured that his wife would get tired of her spa day so easily. Why couldn’t she enjoy anything anymore? He complained.

Once she hung up the phone with Mr. Watson, she realized that Buck had disappeared. She cleared up the mess behind the desk, put away the folders that she had disturbed, and made a note of the phone code in her own binder. For a moment, she was distracted by some of the players on the courts, which she could watch from the window that separated the waiting room from the playing surface. She double-checked the schedule book to understand who was playing, on which court, how much money they owed, and when they were scheduled to finish their match.

After a few minutes, she decided to go to the front of the club to look for Mr. Watson. She saw that the sun was setting, a fact that she couldn’t have observed from the front desk in the windowless waiting room. She would never know what time of day it was or how the weather was outside.

He rolled up to the culdesac entrance in his vintage Volkswagen Beetle and slowly lifted himself from the car. Veda wasn’t sure if she should help him stand up or not. Eventually, Mr. Watson got out of the car and asked Veda if she was the one who had called her. He followed her into the club, and Veda went into the ladies room to make

sure that Jasmine was ready to go home. The other women were still there, and they were laughing and handing the elderly woman sample perfumes from the counter so that she could spray herself with luxurious scents. Now Veda would somehow have to ventilate the sauna.

“Okay, Jasmine’s husband is here to take her home. He said to tell you all that he is taking her out for a special birthday surprise,” said Veda.

They all sighed and helped Jasmine out of the sauna to dress, still unfazed by her nakedness. Perhaps, under their clothes, their own bodies looked more like Jasmine’s body than Veda’s did. Veda was relieved that she didn’t even have to help Jasmine this time around because these women were so willing to do the work for her. All Veda had to do was make sure that the woman got to her husband safely and that they both left in their tiny car.

At least Jasmine was able to have a little bit of fun on her birthday, thought Veda. Once the women broke up their party and Jasmine was packed safely in Bill Watson’s car, Veda returned to the front desk and hoped that she didn’t miss too much. She looked at her watch; she must have been gone only fifteen minutes, and the tennis court occupants were still scheduled to play for another twenty. The phone may have rang, but Veda was only one person, and she had to attend to whatever situation was at hand.

She went to look for Sally and Buck. Through Sally’s office window, Veda could see Sally’s desk was empty. The young man that she had sold a membership to was already working out in the weight room, bench-pressing a heavy bar. The only sounds were the squeals of some kids playing cards in the waiting room, the sound of a ball hitting the taut strings of the tennis racquets, the sound of the cardio equipment whirring,

and the pounding of the feet hitting the treadmill's surface. Suddenly, Veda heard a high-pitched yelp from the office and decided to check, just in case someone was hurt or needed help.

When Veda opened the door, she saw Sally bent over the copy machine, with the waistband of her tight, black spandex pants hugging her thighs. Buck had his palm on the small of Sally's back, steadying her, and he held a syringe in his other hand. The tip of the needle was pressed against Sally's right butt cheek, making a dent in her skin. She had thrown her head back so that her blond hair cascaded over her black shirt.

Sally was beautiful, Veda thought. The gym was such a place of bodily perfection that Veda was only a little shocked by what she saw. In the glow of the fluorescent lights with the sound of the young man grunting in the weight room and the fitness magazines covering Sally's desk, this just seemed normal.

When they saw Veda, both of them turned around and acted as if nothing was unusual, greeting her in a normal way. Veda smiled politely and wasn't sure what else to do except walk out of the office and return to her post on the stool behind the front desk. She lowered her head over the staff handbook and flipped furiously through the pages, trying to find something about steroids, office relationships, proper dress and conduct, anything that might explain or confirm the scene in Sally's office. If Veda was going to be the best front desk employee, even better than Jasmine, she would have to know everything.

Through the waiting room viewing window, Veda could see just one player, a girl slightly older than her, on the court closest to the waiting room. The waiting room wall blocked Veda's view of the other player, and she could only see the ball as it came back

from the other side, and the girl's reaction to it. The girl's form was horrible, Veda thought, but she never missed a shot. The scorecard showed that she was winning. Veda would need to play like that, if she ever wanted to make varsity tennis and redeem her high school experience.

The staff handbook warned employees not to make personal calls, but Veda wanted so badly to tell someone about her crazy first day at work. She couldn't wait until after closing time because she was so excited about this job, about this new world, and about her new dedication to her favorite sport. She looked around to make sure no one was watching and dialed the number for her new friend Madsy, the girl who sat next to her in art class at Saint Margaret's.

Flame Retardant Fabric

The best friends walked into first period art class, hiding cups of coffee under their identical, polyester, navy-blue sweaters. If Sister Marion caught them with coffee, Veda and Madsy would have to stay after school for detention, in a classroom where they would be forced to stare at a picture of Jesus until they felt sorry for their violation.

The sophomore twins had stolen their usual seats in front of the window, at the back of the art room, where Veda and Madsy liked to sit because the sun kept their backs warm. Also, it was easier for Veda to paint and fully focus on her art projects if her limbs weren't frozen. What the hell were the names of those twins? They looked so similar that Veda could never remember.

"I don't know if we're going to be able to sit next to each other today," Madsy whispered, since Sister Marion had already started the morning prayer. Veda walked as quietly as she could to an empty workspace on the other side of the room while Madsy sat at the other empty desk, nearest the sink. Sister Marion didn't even notice. Her eyes were closed as she led prayer, and she had trouble hearing.

Veda never said prayers. Instead of praying with the class, Veda picked dried acrylic paint from under her fingernails and took sips of the coffee she was hiding while Sister Marion's eyes remained closed. Veda was still tired from staying up late the night

before and painting. She had fallen asleep on the floor and woke up to the sound of her alarm. Her hair had been stuck to the paint on her canvas, and she had to slowly pull herself from the paint, which had dried overnight.

She just thought prayers were so unoriginal. If she wanted to say something to someone, she would come up with her own way of saying it. Or, she would make a picture and give it to that person.

She looked at Madsy at the other side of the room and shook her head at the sophomore twins. Veda saw her friend slump down into the broken chair that wasn't tall enough for the desk. No one ever wanted that chair because it was difficult for working. She felt bad for her best friend. Veda didn't like confrontations and hoped that the sophomores would not make a habit of stealing their usual seats; otherwise, Veda would have to hijack them indirectly, by smudging glue on their chairs or accidentally spilling brush back-wash onto one of their projects.

"Saint Jerome, pray for us," said Sister Marion, concluding the prayers. "Alright girls, do you all have projects to keep you busy today?"

All the girls shook their heads in affirmation and went to different parts of the room to retrieve their works in progress. This was Veda's favorite part of the day, returning to an art project. She knew that Madsy didn't like art as much as she did, but Veda never really cared that Madsy didn't love art because Veda always liked to talk to her friend while she worked. Also, they sometimes liked to take turns bringing breakfast to class and sneaking bites of bagels while Sister Marion worked on her own projects at the front of the room.

The room was bright, and the white walls were covered with projects in progress. Each piece of art had an index card beneath it so that the students could leave anonymous feedback for their classmates. Before Veda got her materials, she examined some of the latest drafts. In one charcoal drawing of a summer beach chair, Veda saw plenty of potential. Karen, the artist, had lots of apparent talent. Veda could also tell from the careful attention to detail and the perfect lines that the girl who had made this drawing was afraid to take risks, was more interested in using art as a way to please her teachers and impress her friends than as a way to express herself.

What a phony, thought Veda. She was always jealous of the girls who were really precise and patient but who didn't seem to care either way about art. Karen was like that. She was a freshman who got to skip freshman art because she was supposedly really talented. From what Veda knew about Karen, what everyone knew about Karen at Saint Margaret's, was that her mom owned a local artist's collective, and Karen had the opportunity to exhibit her work in many youth art shows. Veda was insanely jealous of this girl. How come Veda wasn't able to skip freshman art?

She tried to tell herself that Karen wouldn't be as successful as she would be one day. She knew that dedication and persistence would get an artist through the uninspired periods. Veda even knew that herself. Her own art wasn't perfect, but she was always dedicated to the task.

The index cards were empty, except for the ones that Veda had filled with her own handwriting. Veda was one of the only students that ever commented on the artwork, so everyone else always knew what Veda thought of their art. Veda was very critical of her classmates' work, but she always tried her best to make constructive

comments, like “apply the shadow more heavy-handedly” or “reconsider the placement of your horizon.” Some pieces that she had just commented on last week were already up again after revisions. Clearly, Veda thought, the artists couldn’t have revised their work as thoroughly as they should have, if her classmates were ready for another round of critiques so soon.

Veda was especially annoyed when she saw that no one ever really cared enough to take her comments into consideration or make the revisions that she suggested. Making these comments, like suggesting that Karen try drawing something unique, rather than a standard beach chair, comforted her on the days that Veda felt like she didn’t have a lot of talent. Other people’s strengths often discouraged her.

Sister Marion had created a bulletin board covered with brochures from art schools and flyers for student art contests. Veda glanced over the new brochures that Sister Marion had added and wondered where she might end up after high school. A junior now, Veda had to start thinking about college, in a broad sense. She knew that she wanted to attend college, but she didn’t know if she wanted to apply to an arts school or to a school with an arts program. She didn’t really understand art school anyway; it just seemed like a safe haven.

The true artists would find a way to make art no matter what, and Veda didn’t need a special environment to be able to do that. These questions amused her; they seemed so distant and fantastical, and she almost wondered if she would ever really have to answer them.

In one corner of the classroom was a kiln for firing clay projects, and in another corner was a paint-splattered sink and a soaking bin for dirty brushes. Each art student

had a space on a drying rack to keep paintings and other works in progress. Veda moved the layers on the drying rack to find the one with her name on it and removed a collage that she had been constructing from torn bits of magazine pages, decoupage glue, and cardboard. Her assignment was to recreate a portrait of a famous person and to capture the expression, color, and realistic representation of that person's face.

Veda had chosen the pop singer Britney Spears. She had drawn the outline on the page and had no trouble at all finding reds to match the color of Britney's lipstick. However, Veda was having trouble finding the right color to match her skin.

"Sister Marion, do you think I should look for photos or illustrations to match the skin?" Asked Veda.

"Either one works, Veda. A mixture would be interesting, especially if you can pull it off. Experiment with the colors."

Veda was frustrated with the project, and she wanted to do something that was more her own style, but Sister Marion told Veda that she had to do at least three assigned projects before she could pursue independent study. Veda had already learned these principles in art classes she had taken for fun or from books she had read in her spare time. Sister Marion's projects bored her.

She waved at Madsy. Veda knew that Madsy was having trouble with her decoupage jewelry box, and she was sad that she couldn't help her friend from the other side of the room. Madsy couldn't figure out how to pick the right collage scraps so that her jewelry box wouldn't look like a mess of litter and broken glass left by careless drivers on the Turnpike. Madsy was a gifted writer, but she had no capacity for visual

art. Veda usually had to help Madsy with her projects, and Veda felt proud and useful when she helped her best friend.

Sister Marion often let the girls listen to music during class, as long as the music was “acceptable,” but it didn’t really matter because Sister Marion could barely ever hear it. Unacceptable music included anything with a heavy rap beat or songs with lyrics that promoted promiscuity, drugs, or alcohol. Madsy got up from her project and turned on the radio, a battery-powered, AM/FM device with a clump of aluminum wrapped around the antenna tip. If anyone moved the dial, they would have a hard time finding the station again, so Sister Marion would never change the station, only shut off the radio if she didn’t like what was playing.

The top 40 station from New York City was playing Britney Spear’s latest hit “Toxic.” Madsy and Veda liked Britney because she first gained fame with a music video in which she dressed like a Catholic school-girl in a plaid skirt just like the one they wore at school. Britney had represented a reality that was completely different from the one in which Veda and Madsy lived.

If they had ever even thought about pulling their white button-down shirts up over their bellies and knotting the fabric under their breasts, they would probably be expelled from school. If they ever showed up at school with as much makeup as Britney or with pink pompoms in their hair, they would probably receive detention for expressing themselves too much.

Veda was waiting for Sister Marion to turn off the radio because she knew that Britney Spears and her overt sexuality would offend the nun. However, Sister Marion didn’t seem to notice. She was leaning over an art supply catalogue at her desk in the

front of the room and comparing a handwritten list to the items featured in the catalogue. Veda knew that Sister Marion would circle many of the supplies but not be able to buy most of them because of the school's limited budget. Sister Marion complained to Veda about it all the time, and Veda listened because she was fascinated with art supplies.

From the corner of her eye, Veda saw that Madsy had started to untuck her shirt from her heavy, wool skirt, imitating the Britney Spears video and giggling as she did so. Veda smiled at her friend and began to tear pieces of whatever flesh-colored magazine pages she could find. She wondered where these magazines came from; they were all fashion magazines and celebrity tabloids from the past year, and Veda had a hard time focusing on choosing appropriate colors because every few pages, she was distracted by a salacious article about a hot young celebrity.

How was she ever supposed to finish this project if she couldn't even gather the materials? Maybe, if Veda were to bring in a pornographic magazine, she would probably have no problem at all finding shades of skin. But of course, the fact that she was not yet eighteen and went to a school that would, she imagined, corporally punish such activity prevented her from doing so. Regardless, the porno mag would definitely make her project easier to complete.

The radio DJ interrupted the Britney Spears song, and Sister Marion looked up from her catalogue, as if she had just then realized that the radio had been playing. The change from the music to the male voice was so urgent and drastic that all the girls shifted in their seats a little when they heard it. The first thing Veda wondered was if the interruption was some unexpected, wonderful ticket giveaway. She was ready to jump up

out of her chair and run to the payphone in the cafeteria the moment the DJ announced the prize.

“We have just received news that a plane has crashhh.” Static. The poor antenna reception interfered with the rest of the DJ’s message.

“What did he say?” Asked Veda. Madsy moved her hand to the tip of the antenna and pressed down onto the aluminum foil so that they could hear more clearly. She even tilted the antenna in different directions to see if she could improve the signal. One of the sophomore girls got up to get a paper towel from the sink station, and the reception suddenly improved. Madsy didn’t know which twin was which because they look exactly the same. “Wait, you! Stand right there.”

“The north tower, the one with the antenna,” said the radio DJ. “We will provide updates as we receive them.”

“Don’t worry, girls,” said Sister Marion. “Everything will be okay. Get back to your work and pray quietly for New York City.”

Veda tried to imagine the scene. She pictured a tiny, two-passenger plane or one of those planes that flies over the Hudson River, the kind that gives tourists aerial tours of the city. She had almost gotten Madsy a ticket for one of those tours for her sixteenth birthday but decided she couldn’t afford it. Thank goodness she hadn’t done it, she thought. Those pilots must be really inexperienced if they were flying into the WTC, which was a pretty tough set of buildings to miss.

“How does a plane crash into the WTC?” She asked.

“Why do you call it the WTC?” Asked a sophomore twin. Veda couldn’t believe that she would even dare try to talk to her, especially after stealing her seat.

“Well, it’s the abbreviation,” said Veda, not in any mood to explain.

“We call it the WTC because that’s the name they use on the PATH trains that run between the Hoboken and WTC stop,” said Madsy. “Not that we’d ever take those trains. I mean, what’s there to do in the financial district anyway?”

The other girls sat up straighter in their stools, and Madsy put her hands flat on the table, bracing herself. Karen decided to move her things to be nearer to Sister Marion. She was working on a faux stained glass piece, gluing tissue paper to a black construction paper frame with gaps for the light to shine through the transparent paper. Karen was so tiny that she looked like she could have been in elementary school still and weighing no more than eighty pounds.

Veda had no idea how Karen fit all that talent in her tiny body. But she could understand how a nun, wearing her hand-sewn black dress and softening black hood, might bring a freshman comfort. She glared at Karen with annoyance in her eyes and hated the way Karen had pulled her chair up next to Sister Marion, letting the nun adjust the collar of her uniform.

The Britney Spears song resumed where it had been interrupted. Veda saw Karen’s migration as an opportunity to move closer to Madsy, now that the seat next to her best friend was empty. She picked up the pile of magazines that she was supposed to be tearing and carried them across the room. By the time Veda arrived to sit next to her best friend, Madsy’s fingers were stuck to the desk, and Veda had to help her pull them off the somewhat white, eraser-smudged, Formica surface.

“I hate Karen,” Veda whispered.

“I hate this project,” Madsy added.

“Just try to stick with complementary colors,” said Veda. “Or even a color family. Do all shades of red, if that’s what you like.”

“I really don’t need another random box,” said Madsy. Madsy’s complaint was always that visual art added clutter to her life.

“I was thinking about finding some porno mags to make my job of finding flesh-colored magazine pages easier,” said Veda. “Do you know where we could get some?”

“The boys on my bus read porno magazines in the morning,” said Madsy, laughing so hard she had to brace herself on the old, wobbly chair. “I could probably ask them.”

“You just smudged decoupage glue on your skirt,” said Veda, laughing as Madsy did it.

“Whatever, these things are completely stain resistant,” said Madsy. “I mean, we know they’re fire retardant. What else are these skirts capable of?”

Veda and Madsy had in fact once tried to burn their skirts. It was a Friday night earlier in the year, probably in February, and they had been incredibly bored. What else was there to do for two sixteen year old girls in the suburbs? They wanted to burn their skirts, to see if the flame retardant label was indeed true. Veda built a small campfire site with the skills she had learned in summer camps past, and they threw the skirts on top of the dry sticks and logs. They lit a match, and the wood burned. However, the skirts wouldn’t burn, no matter how hard they tried. They only gave off a funny smell, one that Veda was convinced would kill them if they stuck around too long.

“Attention, ladies,” Sister Agnes’s voice crackled through the PA system, before the radio announcer had a chance to update them. “We just received notice that an

accident has occurred in New York City. A plane crashed into one of the World Trade Center buildings. We will keep you posted.”

Karen grabbed onto Sister Marion’s arm as if to stabilize herself, and Sister Marion picked up her rosary and closed her eyes, first demanding that the girls remain quiet and reflective, then mumbling and rolling the beads between her fingers. Veda really admired the nuns’ devotion to their rosaries, and she sometimes wished that she could put that much faith into what was essentially a piece of jewelry. Veda loved to make her own jewelry, and she loved beading, but the only feelings she ever had about a string of beads were either that it wasn’t good enough for her or how much she could sell it for, especially if she had used exotic beads that cost her a lot of money.

“Sister Marion? Can I turn on the television?” Asked Veda.

Sister Marion seemed so absorbed in her rosary praying that the girls couldn’t tell if she had heard anything that Sister Agnes had said. Their art teacher nodded, still with her eyes shut tightly. Madsy shut off the radio, and Veda turned on the television, which sat on a rolling cart that teachers sometimes borrowed for special presentations.

She tuned it to the news station, probably the only station that worked in addition to the Spanish station, which they watched sometimes in Spanish class; telenovelas were good for learning new phrases. The only time that Sister Marion used the television in her class was to show the girls episodes of the *Joy of Painting* with Bob Ross that she had once taped years ago, using the VCR in the nunnery.

“I hope that not a lot of people were hurt,” said Madsy, trying to wipe the decoupage glue off her hands with her skirt, given that she had already messed it up and owned four more exact replicas. The television screen showed footage of the portion of

the tower that was burning. A chunk of it had opened up like the flaming mouth of an angry dragon, and black smoke was pouring out of it. The camera focused solely on the burning part of the structure, with the other tower in shadow and soot.

“I was just there a few weeks ago,” said one of the sneaky sophomore girls. “My parents and I went to the observation deck at the top.”

Veda tore out a random page from a magazine and began to tear it haphazardly, hoping that the colors, once they were separated from a whole, would inspire or move her in some way. She started to feel dizzy. She had been to the observation deck once too, during a field trip in elementary school, though she didn’t remember the view. What she remembered about the trip was the elevator, which was about half the size of her bedroom, and Veda felt claustrophobic and dizzy in that elevator. She thought it would never reach the top.

Madsy was at the sink, washing her hands, when Veda shrieked. Another plane crashed into the second tower. Karen started to cry, and the sophomore girls held hands under the table. No one spoke.

Even though first period was only half-way over, Veda could hear girls in the hallway now, running and crying. She knew immediately that some of her classmates were even more shocked than she was; many of the girls who attended Saint Margaret’s had parents and other family members who worked in or near the World Trade Center.

“Please stay calm, everyone,” said Sister Agnes over the PA system. “Terrorists have attacked the World Trade Center. Please remain in your classrooms until further notice. If you need to call your family because of an emergency, please come to the office.”

Madsy took her cell phone out of her backpack and turned it on, but she couldn't get any service. Veda saw that Madsy could barely press the buttons on her phone because her hands were shaking violently. Veda was paging through the magazine pages on her workspace nervously, not really paying attention to the glossy images anymore. One of the sophomore girls had gone over to Karen and began to hug her because Sister Marion could no longer placate the little girl. The television was showing live footage of two towers burning now, like the wicks of Veda's two favorite candles that smoked when she didn't cut them down to the proper length.

Veda got up and closed the classroom door to keep out the noise of panic in the hall and also to make her and her classmates feel safer. According to the news, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey was in the process of closing all the tunnels and bridges in the area.

Veda knew how interconnected northern New Jersey and New York City were, even though most people never acknowledged it. She liked to show it in her paintings and drawings, creating visual representations of places like the Meadowlands in shadow, because they had been neglected, abused, and forgotten. To close the bridges and tunnels would be like Saint Margaret's Academy losing its brother school. For whom would the girls put on makeup at the end of the day? Okay, not that drastic, Veda thought.

"Are you girls saying prayers?" Asked Sister Marion. "Maybe we should do a group prayer. Let's hold hands."

One of the buildings fell. Veda looked at the television screen and wanted to reach her hand inside the glowing box and twist the image in some way. Watching Bob Ross sometimes gave her that impulse too; she wanted to grab the paintbrush from him

and add her own details or take scissors to his overgrown afro. But the television screen changed to a picture of the Pentagon, which was also burning, because another plane had crashed into it now too. All along the northeast corridor, planes were crashing and buildings were burning.

Why couldn't they make buildings out of the same materials as their ugly skirts? Why were the girls at Saint Margeret's more important than the people who worked in and near the World Trade Center? Who flew planes from Boston to New York? Who worked in the nation's capital? Why couldn't everything be covered with one flame-retardant plaid skirt?

Veda unbuttoned the button on the side, by her hip, and she started to unzip the zipper. She pulled the skirt down over her hips and Madsy only noticed just as Veda had slipped the skirt to the floor, where it caused the pencil shavings and wood slivers to unsettle and create a small cloud of dust. Luckily, Veda was wearing a pair of boxer shorts under her skirt, like most of the other girls did.

"What the hell are you doing?" Madsy asked, in a whisper, trying to avoid drawing attention to Veda.

"I was hoping I could cover everything with my skirt," said Veda, before she realized how ridiculous her idea was. Madsy laughed uncomfortably and began to pick scraps that she had already glued to her decoupage box. "What are you doing?"

"I don't know. Maybe it will look better if I start to take it apart."

"Don't do that," said Veda, slapping Madsy's hand.

Karen was crying, and Sister Marion was trying to get her to play with a paint-by-number set that she had been keeping in her desk. In one hand, Sister Marion was

clutching the rosary so hard that her knuckles turned white. The sophomore girl at the front was practically petting Karen, telling her to breathe in her nose and out of her mouth. Veda found herself listening to the sophomore girl's advice, and began to follow her directions. She too was breathing evenly now and thought it was best to remain where she was, immobile, focusing only on her breathing and the sound it made, the movement of her chest rising and falling.

"I remember what the skyline looked like before the towers existed," said Sister Marion. Sometimes Veda forgot that there was ever a time they didn't exist because the towers had been present her entire life. Veda's parents probably remembered that time too, thought Veda. The towers were a part of her reality, of her image of New York City. New York was no longer New York. The skyline that she would see driving to Jersey City to visit Baba or going to the Lincoln Tunnel would no longer contain a tall tower.

The sophomore girl dropped Karen's hand and stopped breathing for her and ran to the back of the room to hug her sister. Veda suddenly wished that she had a twin, someone who could understand her so well, who would accept her for all her paranoia, overthinking, and anxiety. Sure, Veda had her quirky nightmares, wondering if the cookie she ate was going to make her gain ten pounds, if her parents would going to die in a car crash, and leave her orphaned, if the boy she liked would ever notice her. She wasn't supposed to worry about mammoth buildings or anything more than what she had to face on a daily basis, she thought. She didn't even think it was possible to worry about more than that.

Veda decided to be happy with the fact that she was isolated on a hill with nuns, with this art project to occupy her for the time being, while the cries from the hallway

grew louder. She took some of the scraps that she had torn haphazardly and started to arrange them within the sketched outline of Britney's face: purple, azure, yellow, and red-orange. She didn't really care if they matched as long as the pieces fit within the outlines and the torn edges of each piece flowed into the next one. At least the project gave her a reason to stare down at the table, feel the glue on her fingers, and focus on arranging the pieces as neatly and precisely as she could, which distracted her from everything else.

"What are you doing now?" Asked Madsy, who had picked up Veda's skirt from the ground, wiped it off, and folded it neatly. Veda was sitting on the stool in her boxer shorts, intent on completing the ridiculous project. "Why don't you pray?"

But Veda had stopped praying last year; did Madsy really think she still prayed? She must have done a good job pretending in class, when she crossed herself, closed her eyes, and thought about nothing.

Just when Veda didn't think it could get any worse, the other tower collapsed. Karen screamed so loudly that Veda jumped, knocking some of her scrap paper all over the floor. Veda couldn't believe that Karen had that scream in her tiny body, the same way that she couldn't believe Karen had all that talent. She had not even gotten used to the fact that one tower was gone, and now both towers were gone. Veda wanted to hug Madsy or ask her for reassurance, but her friend had her eyes clenched tight in inward prayer.

Sister Marion would probably give her an F for this project, or maybe she would let her redo it; either way, this would mean that she would have to do more assigned projects before she could pursue her independent study. Sister Marion would not hang

this project up on the wall for everyone to critique, and she probably wouldn't mind if she brought this one home. But she deserved that, she realized now, because she had no imagination, if she couldn't imagine something like the WTC falling.

The twins were hugging one another and stroking each other's long hair. Veda still couldn't tell who was who, but it didn't seem to matter because the two combined were like one girl comforting herself. They needed one another as much as Veda needed her art. If they ever took her and Madsy's seats again, she would think twice before getting angry.

She went to the index card filled wall and began to take down the index cards one at a time. Who was she to judge her classmates? She couldn't even finish her own stupid collage project, which should have been an easy and quick task. Whether they realized it or not, they all needed to be able to make these paintings and drawings without any critical feedback.

Veda looked at Karen, who was now sitting on Sister Marion's lap. She was so small, Veda thought, and looked more fearful than Veda could ever imagine. She wanted to give Karen back her own paintings and show her how much talent the little girl had and that she didn't need to be afraid. Karen possessed a skill, and now she needed to learn what she could do with it.

Veda just had to do even more with her own skills, she needed to take this collage project home with her and spend more time on it. The problem was getting it home without anyone seeing it. Given that the cardboard was so large, either the boys on her bus or her parents were bound to notice her work. She would not know how to explain it.

What was it and where was it going? It was supposed to be a picture of Britney Spears but what it would become she couldn't say.

Fireworks

On the day of prom, a Friday, the school administration allowed the senior girls to leave early so that they could prepare for the big night. Instead of the beauty salon, Veda and Madsy went to Neiman Marcus, where Madsy's aunt worked. She allowed them to have a private fitting room, and she brought them all the latest, most expensive styles for the girls to try.

Veda was excited when she found out that she was actually a size smaller than Madsy; they couldn't try on all the same gowns because the dresses didn't fit each girl the same way. She liked the reassurance that she was at least skinnier than her best friend because it made her feel like she was in control.

Veda had a small chest and couldn't pull off the plunging halter or strapless dresses, even though she had sculpted shoulders that looked good bare. She was not very curvy, and a lot of dresses hung on her. Madsy looked great in the fluffy dresses with the luxurious fabric wrapped around her hips. They both looked so mature and sophisticated in their formal dresses that the girls barely recognized themselves in the mirror when they spun around in the embellished fabric.

Veda and Madsy had already decided not to go to prom because they didn't know any boys worth taking. Most of their other classmates at Saint Margaret's Academy for

Girls had been set up with brothers, cousins, or friends of classmates who had boyfriends. The two friends didn't think it was worth spending hard-earned money from their part-time jobs on dresses they would wear once and formal hairstyles that would take forever to comb out at the end of the night.

Veda worked at a gym, as a front-desk girl and occasional nursery attendant, and Madsy worked as an usher and ticket salesperson at the community theatre. It just wasn't worth their slim paychecks to spend an expensive night with a skinny and pimply date who would probably try to get whatever he could at the end by asking for a blow-job in the diner or getting drunk from the alcohol he would somehow sneak into the prom. They also wanted to save themselves the effort of laughing at the boys when they would, inevitably, ask for a ride home or act ridiculously.

Instead, Veda and Madsy would finish trying on the dresses, take a bus into Manhattan, have a fun dinner at the Chinese restaurant with drag-queen servers, and then go back to Madsy's house, where they would spend the night, meanwhile talking themselves down from the fat feelings they would have as a result of the brownie sundae they would share.

In her purse, Veda had a camera, an old style point-and-shoot unlike the new digital cameras that were becoming popular. She always carried a camera with her. She had a fancier camera that her grandfather gave her when she was younger, but it didn't make sense to carry that camera with her for impromptu trips. She was also terrified of having it stolen. This camera, however, she didn't mind carrying with her. Veda loved bringing the camera with her everywhere because she never knew when she was going to get a great photograph. Sometimes she just kept the photos for herself, and other times

she used them as inspirations for her drawings or paintings. Other times, she made collages with her photos.

“Hey, let’s take pictures!” Veda said to Madsy. She let Madsy twirl around in her dresses as she snapped pictures of her glamorous-looking friend. Madsy took some pictures of Veda too, even though Veda was worried that they wouldn’t come out well. She didn’t trust many people with her camera, and she trusted even fewer people to take good photos. However, she knew Madsy would be careful because Madsy had artistic sensibilities; she was a writer and understood creative precision.

“Do you wish even a little bit that you were going to prom?” Asked Madsy.

“Maybe a little bit,” said Veda. They both collapsed onto the plush sofa in the private fitting room, letting the bright lights glitter off the sheen of their dresses. “Will we regret this one day?”

“If we knew guys that we really wanted to bring, maybe then we’d have a reason to go,” said Madsy.

Going to a small all-girls school allowed them little opportunity to meet young men, not that any of them were worth meeting anyway, they had both decided. Their high school was part of a Catholic nunnery in one of the wealthiest counties in northern New Jersey, on a hill surrounded by an armory and mansions. Their graduating class was only fifty. Saint Margaret’s Academy for Girls had a brother school on the other side of the hill, a private all-boy’s school that had more than twice the students. The majority of the boys at Pemberton were white, upper-middle-class, Northface fleece, khaki pants and button-down shirt wearing, pot-smoking boys whose fathers worked on Wall Street.

“Are you still upset about Thomas?” Madsy asked. She pulled at the bunched material of her skirt, smoothing it over her thighs. “Would you have asked him?”

Despite the close proximity of the boys, the only opportunities the girls really had to interact with them were on the school bus and at football games, which a lot of girls attended with the hopes of meeting someone new. For most of the school year, Veda really wanted to bring Thomas to the prom. Thomas was a boy on her bus, and they would see each other every morning. As an unspoken rule, the girls would sit in the front of the bus and study, and the boys would sit in the back of the bus with hoods over their heads, sleeping. Thomas sat sort of in the middle of the bus, and he would recommend music to Veda and tell her about his grandfather’s house in Nantucket. Sometimes she would see him in the afternoon. After school, Veda would go into the bathroom and apply makeup so that she could look pretty for the bus ride, where she might see Thomas or some other cute high school boy. She spent the entire day looking forward to the school bus ride.

She really liked Thomas and hoped they could develop a close enough relationship so that she could ask him to the prom, but he got his driver’s license and a car before Veda could do it and before Veda got a car, so she lost her chances with her only prospect.

“I think I would have asked him, if it had felt right,” said Veda. “But then what about you? Who would you have taken? You know I wouldn’t go unless you had a date.”

Madsy talked to a college guy she sometimes saw, when he was home in New Jersey, but Bill went to school in Boston, where he studied screenwriting. He wouldn’t

be around for prom, and anyway, Madsy felt weird asking a twenty-year-old to escort her to a high school function, even though most of her classmates would probably be jealous if she could get a college guy to be her date.

It was weird enough that they had to ask the boys themselves. Veda had gone to public school her entire life, and then her parents decided it would be better for her to go to an all-girls school so that boys wouldn't distract her from her studies. The funny thing was that attending an all-girl's school distracted from her studies even more. Because she was separated from boys, she became obsessed with them, with meeting them, talking to them, hanging out with them, and finding ways to kiss them. All her and Madsy ever talked about were boys, what they said to her, and what did they mean? Boys consumed her because she never saw them, couldn't have them.

"What happens at public high schools?" Veda asked. They had heard stories that other friends told them and saw the unrealistic proms on television shows like *Saved by the Bell*, which portrayed a high school experience completely unlike their own. "Do the boys ask the girls, do the girls ask the boys, do the pair-ups just happen? Do they have to ask friends to set them up with dates? Do they have prom kings and prom queens?"

Madsy's aunt came into the fitting room and told them that they would have to give up the gowns and the room because a paying client had arrived. The paying client, the girls found out on their way out of the fitting room, was Susanne, another girl in their class who was doing some very last-minute prom dress shopping. Susanne was the daughter of the Morristown mayor, and Susanne's mother was very active in the school's parent association; she organized lunch meetings and cocktail hours for school mothers. Madsy and Veda's mothers never attended these social events because they worked full-

time and weren't really interested in socializing with the other mothers. Veda wished that her mother was more active because Veda herself gained a negative reputation because her mother was too busy to attend the meetings.

"Hey girls!" said Susanne. "Are you picking up dresses?"

"No, we were actually here hoping that we would run into you," said Veda.

Madsy hit Veda on her butt with her purse. "We just wanted to see everyone's pretty dresses since we won't be going to prom. It's better to see the dresses in person than in pictures."

"What? Why aren't you going to prom?" Susanne pretended to be shocked, but both girls knew that she wasn't shocked because if any of the girls weren't going to prom, it would be Madsy and Veda, who always sat together at lunch, while many of the other lunch tables were crowded with large groups of girls. They often skipped mass, sneaking out the locker room door and running down the big snow-covered hill to the parking lots, soaking their socks. They would sit next to each other in Theology, the only class they had together, and write funny notes to each other on Veda's assignment pad, which became more of a doodle and memory book than a place to write down homework tasks. Susanne probably already knew. The whole class probably knew that the best friends weren't attending prom.

"We aren't going because my parents are throwing an exclusive party at their shorehouse, and we would rather go there," said Veda.

"Yeah, it's going to be an all-weekend event with catered meals, endless champagne, and a live band," said Madsy.

Veda smiled because she liked when Madsy played along with her stories.

A writer, Madsy was always the one who was good at inventing details.

“We’re going to build bonfires by the water and hang out with her parents’ sophisticated friends,” Madsy continued.

“That’s fabulous,” said Susanne. “But we’ll miss you at prom.”

“We’ll miss you too, Susanne,” said Veda. Veda and Madsy said goodbye to Madsy’s aunt and skipped out into the main part of Neiman Marcus.

“You are such a bitch,” said Madsy. “But that was really hilarious. Do you think she believed us?”

The inside of the store was pristine and echoing, like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which they had visited a few weeks before with Sister Helen, the Theology teacher who didn’t like either of the girls because they wouldn’t pray out loud at the beginning of class. Neiman Marcus was quiet too, like a church, and Veda almost expected to hear the voice of Kathryn, the head choir girl, start singing behind her and Mr. Porsha, the gay choir director and organ player, begin to play loud, dramatic music. The mannequins were white and faceless, like the marble statues of angels that stood in the front yard of Saint Margaret’s Academy. Veda couldn’t escape school, no matter where she went, and she hoped that moving away to college would help her move away from Catholic high school as well.

“Whatever,” said Veda. “I just thought of a good senior prank. We should dress the marble angels in sexy bikinis. And also, now I want to go down the shore. When I told Susanne all that crap, I started to believe it myself.”

“So let’s do it,” said Madsy. “We don’t really have anything better planned.”

“The angels or the shore or both?”

“Everything.”

Veda and Madsy knew that they were good girls, but in the context of their strict Catholic school environment and under the strict rule of their parents with high expectations, they tried to get away with what little things they could get away with. Veda’s public school friends told her about kids that brought guns and marijuana to school. Neither of the girls had ever done drugs, they barely ever drank, and Madsy was the only one who had tried a cigarette. They were basically so innocent that no one ever believed them when they said they were innocent.

At Saint Margaret’s, the administration’s biggest concerns were unnatural colors of hair dye and sneaker socks. For instance, the danger of the senior prank, just like the danger of wearing the wrong color shoes or making other school uniform violations, would be overwhelming. As punishment, they would have to sit in an empty classroom for an hour and be forced to silently reflect in front of a painting of Jesus. Veda really hated the painting of Jesus, with its lifelike eyes.

They went out to the mall parking lot and found Veda’s car and then drove out to Veda’s house, about a half hour away from the mall and also from school. She lived outside of the central district of the school, but her neighborhood was still affluent, with the same types of large houses and suburban sprawl that could be found closer to school. Veda’s parents did not have a shore house, and they didn’t have very many sophisticated friends either. However, they did own a large brick house on a well-landscaped piece of two, isolated acres. In general, her parents liked to keep to themselves. Veda’s mom was a small business consultant, and her dad worked in corporate real estate. Neither one of

them was particularly creative in their work or their social circles, but they both appreciated and supported the arts.

Veda's dad collected art that he bought at art shows and auctions, and their house was littered with it. Every possible space of wall had some type of art decorating it, from modern to reproduction to original to Renaissance. In some rooms, her parents had leaned picture frames against the walls just so that it wouldn't be put away in a closet or in the attic. In one room, her dad even had a modern art mobile that hung from the ceiling. They had little sculptures and figurines on almost every table and surface, which was probably a reason that Veda was never allowed to have a pet besides a fish because a pet would ruin the art.

For the most part, Veda never minded the sacrifice because she liked the art and she liked being surrounded by bright colors and designs. They inspired her own artwork. However, some of the art used to scare her as a child. What scared her the most were the concrete gargoyles that Veda's dad had placed in the gardens outside.

"I'm sure we could get a really good rate on a room somewhere, since it's still early in the season," said Madsy, when Veda pulled the car into her space in the garage.

"You're serious about this, aren't you," said Veda. "I like it."

When they got to Veda's house, Veda opened one of her dad's meticulously organized file cabinets and found the family vacation folder. In it, she saw a handful of brochures from motels in Wildwood that listed rates and phone numbers for each one.

"Okay, we're going to have to lie. Our alibi is that we're going to the city for dinner then I'm staying at your house, and you're staying at my house."

“Yeah, let’s do it,” said Madsy, who took the brochures from Veda and laid them out on the kitchen table so that they could see the whole spread at once. The typical prom after-party that their classmates would have had involved taking over someone’s parents’ shorehouse or renting a room to share with ten teenagers. Some kids were even staying at houses where parents would be, because the parents would rather the kids drink with an adult in the house than sneaking around behind their backs. Veda only knew these things because her classmates discussed prom plans constantly. The Jersey shore was standard after-prom fare, but Veda heard that some people might be going to the city afterward instead.

Most kids wouldn’t drive as far as Wildwood, at the southernmost tip of New Jersey, but both Madsy and Veda thought it was the best beach, and if they were going to do this, they were going to do this right. Both girls had a little bit of money, since they didn’t spend it on the Neiman Marcus dresses, shoes, and hairstyles. Veda and Madsy could pool their savings to afford gas, a room for the night, and food. The motel brochures made them smile because most of them were clearly family-owned businesses, small buildings on the ocean. Some were built with Doo-Wop style architecture, which was all the rage when Wildwood first became popular in the 1950s. The brochures were old, but they couldn’t tell whether it was because Veda’s parents had gotten them a long time ago or because the motels hadn’t updated their brochures.

The first motel they called, The Satellite, had a message on their machine, saying that the motel had been purchased by developers and would not be open for the season.

“We used to stay there when I was a kid,” said Veda, who set aside the brochure with the intention of storing it in her special keepsake drawer in the nightstand by her

bed. She was sad to find out that the motel had been knocked down. There was a whole photo album of Veda as a little girl, standing on the Satellite's balcony, beside a fiberglass spaceship, with the ocean in the distance. "That's a bummer."

The second hotel, the Pink Cadillac, had a non-operating phone number. Veda once kissed a boy whose family was staying at the Pink Cadillac. She had met him at the fruit truck, and they had kissed in the game room in the motel, when no one else was around. It was a dare; if Veda had lost the PacMan game, she would have to kiss the boy, whose name she couldn't now remember. She had lost on purpose, hoping that he was serious.

Finally, the girls found a motel that had a room. The Carousel was a hotel on the beach, and their rate was one hundred and twenty nine dollars per night. The brochure showed a picture of a bright, multi-colored motel with carousel horses in front of the office. Veda didn't have any memories that she could remember from the Carousel, but she did remember driving past it on numerous occasions. She was actually surprised that the hotel hadn't been bought by a developer like the others because it never seemed to have a lot of business; the parking lot was never full, and their vacancy sign had always been illuminated.

"Are you twenty-one?" The clerk asked on the phone.

"No, one of us is eighteen and the other is seventeen," said Veda. Madsy was older than Veda by a few months. Veda gave the phone to Madsy.

"Then we can't accept you. It's prom season, and Wildwood is a family town. We don't want any crazy teenagers here."

“Are you serious?” Asked Madsy. “We’re not even going to our prom. We just want to relax.”

“There are just two of you? And you’re both girls?”

“Yes, we’re friends, and we’re coming to Wildwood instead of going to prom,” said Madsy.

“Alright, I guess it’s okay if you’re both just girls,” said the clerk. “We can use the business.”

“We’re going to be there at eight. Is that alright? We just want to stay for one night.”

The clerk took Madsy’s information, and they hung up the phone. Veda decided that she should get her things together and then they could stop at Madsy’s house and then start the drive to Wildwood, before her parents came home and asked her too many questions. She packed pajamas, a bathing suit, sunscreen, flip-flops, and sunglasses in her school backpack, which she emptied on the floor of her bedroom. She changed into black sweatpants and a long sleeve shirt from a Ukrainian summer camp she had once attended.

Veda took a bottle of chardonnay that had a pretty label with an etching of a hedgehog, from her parent’s wine collection in the basement. Veda was always attracted to things with pretty packaging, and she admired the hedgehog for a moment. It was supposed to be their prom night, and the girls could at least each have a glass, Veda thought. She always thought it would be nice to sip wine on the beach, even though she didn’t really drink. Plus, she really wanted someone to empty the pretty bottle so that she could finally use it as a vase for flowers or as some other decoration for her bedroom.

Veda left a note for her parents on the refrigerator, and the girls got back into the car; they stopped at Madsy's house so that she could get her things too. She never felt self-conscious bringing Madsy to her parent's house because Madsy's parents house was just as large. Both girls understood how embarrassing it was when people with more modest living accommodations commented on the grandiosity of their houses; they didn't choose to live there, they were just born into the situations, and they felt like they didn't deserve it in a way. Sticking together, Madsy and Veda could understand what it was like to be brought up the way that they had been raised. Madsy hopped out of the car and returned with the same collection of items, in the gym bag that she used for yoga and dance class.

Despite the fact that Wildwood would probably be deserted and cold at this time of year, Veda couldn't think of a better place to spend a Friday night with her best friend. Veda would be moving to Washington, DC at the end of the summer for college, and Madsy would be staying nearby, attending New York University, so they wanted to spend as much time together as possible before their lives became very different and they made new friends at their new schools. She looked forward to staying up late with Madsy, drinking chardonnay, reminiscing about high school, and complaining to one another about boys, like they always did.

When they merged on the Garden State Parkway South from Route 280, Veda realized too late that she had forgotten to remove her EZ-Pass toll tag from her window and went through the toll without thinking. Her parents, who paid the EZ-Pass bill, would see that she went through the Parkway toll on the day that she was supposed to be having dinner in New York City with Madsy. She panicked and started to swerve in the

lane, trying to remove the EZ pass tag from the window so that it wouldn't happen again, but the tag was stuck under her rear-view mirror, and she had trouble reaching it.

"I'm so stupid. Can you get that for me? Do you think my parents will notice?"

Veda asked, worried that she had blown their cover. Madsy removed the toll tag from Veda's windshield and placed it safely in the glove compartment. She opened her purse and dumped a pile of quarters into the empty cup holder between them, to cover the tolls for the rest of the way.

"Remember that weekend I borrowed my mom's car to visit Bill in Boston? I realized on my way back that I had gone through all the tolls with my mom's tag. No one noticed, and if they did, no one said anything," said Madsy.

Veda turned the music up louder to drown out the worry that her parents would discover what they were really doing. She wondered if having protective parents actually made life more exciting; when she finally gains freedom and moves out of her parent's house, how will she be able to get her thrills? Sure, she didn't like having a curfew and strict rules in her household, but breaking the rules and making up reasons to feel the rush of misbehavior was worth it. Were her parents setting her up for disappointment in the real world? She worried that she might become a deviant, just to fill the void left by no longer having overprotective parents.

The lanes on the Garden State Parkway were narrow, and Veda gripped the steering wheel tightly, worried now about what would happen if she were to have a car accident. Then her parents would really be mad at her. In the passenger seat, Madsy was bopping her head to the beat of the music and waving at people in other cars that passed

them by. Veda wondered if Madsy was as nervous as she was, but she didn't say anything because she didn't want to show her nervousness.

They wouldn't stop to use the bathroom or get drinks until they reached the Cheesequake Service Area because the name made it the only rest area worth stopping at during the long trip down the one-hundred-fifty-mile stretch of Parkway, which was the most direct route to the New Jersey shore points. The Parkway was a road that always had traffic going south on Friday evenings and north Sunday evenings from everyone that migrated from the northern counties to the shore on the weekends. Luckily, since it was still early in the season, the traffic was minimal.

Between exits 124 and 123 was the Cheesequake Service Area. Both Veda and Madsy needed to use the bathroom once they saw the sign for the service area as if the rest area had some sort of Pavlovian effect on them. In the women's restroom with the two-dozen bathroom stalls, they stole live carnations from the small vases by the automatic sinks and arranged them in their hair. The cleaning lady pretended not to notice, but Veda could tell that she was annoyed with the girls for tampering with the flowers.

On the way out, Veda paid a quarter to weigh herself on the scale with the bright blinking lights; the scale would also print out her fortune and lucky number on a small slip of paper. She wanted Madsy to see how little she actually weighed and to comment on the number. Madsy looked away, and Veda told herself that the scale was wrong, even though she was proud of the number; no matter what the scale told her, Veda realized, the scale would always be wrong. The number could never be small enough.

The next thing on the Parkway that they could look forward to seeing were the Pine Barrens, by exits in the 70s on the Garden State Parkway, which cut through the thousands of acres of pine woods in the southeastern part of the state. Veda loved this part of the Parkway because it was mostly a two-lane road, surrounded by trees. She felt like she was driving through some sort of protected national park land, and she was right. She had never seen the Pine Barrens in any other extent besides what was visible from the Parkway but she knew about the legends that thrived in this part of New Jersey, like the one about the Jersey Devil, a flying monster.

“Bill told me that the last time he went to Atlantic City, his friend saw the Jersey Devil from their car. He started screaming from the backseat, but he was also drunk so who knows,” said Madsy. “They had gone down there for the night and then drove back really early in the morning.”

“Keep your eyes peeled, then.”

At exit 65, Veda began to see smoke in the sky, and she worried again that something horrible would happen to them and their car before they could actually make it to Wildwood. The sun was setting, and the sky was so orange that the smoke really stood out against the flaming backdrop. As they continued to drive south, the smoke became thicker and thicker, filling the air like a dark, heavy cloud. The smoke seemed to be coming from the tops of trees in the distance, but it was hard for them to tell since the trees were tall, and they were stuck in a narrow stretch of highway.

“What is that? Fire?” Asked Madsy. “Jersey Devil raising hell?”

“We’re done. We’re being punished for sneaking around our parents and for skipping our senior prom,” said Veda. “This is what happens to bad girls like us.”

Veda wondered if the nuclear power plant in Egg Harbor had exploded and whether they were all dying of radiation poisoning as they sat in her car, her parents unaware of where she really was. She became really nervous. It would be fitting for Veda to die of a nuclear power plant explosion, she thought. When she was in fifth grade, Veda's teacher made her write a paper about the Chernobyl disaster in Ukraine because the teacher knew that Veda was Ukrainian by heritage and wanted Veda to really get in touch with her roots.

What did she know about Chernobyl? When she used to attend Ukrainian school on Saturdays, Veda and her friends used to make fun of the "fresh-off-the-boat" kid in her class, who got leukemia from being exposed to Chernobyl's aftermath. Veda never wanted to visit Ukraine, and she thought it was a disgusting and toxic place. Now she was going to die of a nuclear power plant explosion; that was going to be Ukraine's revenge on her.

"What if the power plant exploded?" Veda always hated driving past that thing. She felt like she was walking over eggshells, simply by being near it, like the vibrations from her car or the beat from her stereo would set that thing off. She couldn't think of any other reason for the smoke. There weren't any tall buildings or any low-flying planes besides the ones that dragged banner advertisements for local bars and restaurants and tanning salons behind them. Maybe someone had hijacked the banner plane, she thought, and they were going to fly the plane into a coast guard tower.

"Oh, the one by the Egg Harbor toll?" Madsy asked. "You're crazy. I bet something is on fire. No big deal."

For miles they drove with the smoke before them; then, after a while they couldn't see it anymore, only a little bit in the rear-view mirrors of Veda's car. A sign informed them to listen to AM radio 740 if they wanted to hear the latest Parkway traffic updates. Perhaps they would find out what happened on the radio. The voice on the crackly AM radio station informed them that a fire had started in the Pine Barrens, presumably after some stupid kids who had smuggled fireworks from Pennsylvania were playing with them deep in the forest.

"Idiots," said Madsy. "I hope they got lost in there."

"I thought forest fires only happened in places like California," said Veda. "That really sucks."

"Well, it hasn't rained that much in the past few weeks. I can understand why it might happen."

Veda was suddenly sad, but she wasn't really sure why. She didn't like the idea of boys playing with fireworks in the beautiful Pine Barrens either. The Pine Barrens were the only thing that anyone ever gave New Jersey credit for; everything else was just smokestacks and landfills. Maybe it was the way the voice on the AM radio had reported the incident so matter-of-factly over the crackly reception or the way that no one on the Parkway had stopped in the shoulder, not even her, to see what might be happening.

She thought about all the animals that lived there and the patches of bare trees destroyed by the gypsy moth nests too. Fires were so viral. She was amazed they could happen so easily, so spontaneously and spread so quickly, filling the sky as if it was closing off the earth from everything else.

She kept telling herself to be relieved that her insides weren't burning from the radiation of the nuclear power plant in Egg Harbor, but as she drove, she began to feel a kind of pressure behind her eyes, as if her lids were becoming heavy from behind the skin. She started to feel a bit shaky and she felt a pain begin in her abdomen, like something was tightly knotting itself.

She must be still getting sick, she thought. For the past few months or so, Veda had been experiencing these strange symptoms, on and off. She thought she had a sinus infection at one point and kept taking sinus medication and then at another point she kept having these horrible headaches and stomachaches but she had no idea why. After a few days, they went away and then came back again. Driving then she almost felt like she would have to tell Madsy that she needed to pull over because she didn't feel good, but she didn't want Madsy to be worried.

"Do you mind if I open the windows?" Asked Veda, knowing that Madsy didn't like when her hair was messed up. "It feels stuffy in here."

"Yeah, whatever."

Veda rolled down her driver's side window and tried her best to breathe evenly. The air started to smell like saltwater and fish, and she felt better once she inhaled it. It reminded her of being a little girl, and it was so different from the air she breathed on a daily basis. Once they got to the end of the Parkway, the road became like any other county road. They entered Cape May County and drove over the Rio Grande Bridge into Wildwood, the place where Veda spent many a summer family vacation as a child. They could smell the sea, they marveled at the boats docked by the streets, and they saw the

glittering lights from the coast guard stations. They knew that they had finally made it to their destination.

North Wildwood, the first part of Wildwood that they would drive through, was run-down and old. The outside was painted brightly and parts of the exterior had different shaped mirrors on it. Teenagers wearing bandanas that made them look like they belonged to gangs rode bicycles up and down the sidewalks but never along the boardwalk, probably to avoid any tourists. They would never see an older person or someone who looked like they held an actual job.

Once they reached Wildwood Crest, they began to see the motels with the architecture from the 1950s and the stylized shapes and bright colors. Families would walk around in this part of Wildwood, though at this time of year, the city was quiet. The Carousel was located right on the beach, about two miles down Atlantic Avenue.

Veda parked her car in one of the spaces reserved for Carousel guests, and the two girls walked into the office to check-in. They dragged their duffel bags with them into the office, where a clerk was standing behind the counter playing solitaire with a deck of cards instead of on a computer. In the office was a rack full of brochures for whale-watching, miniature golf, parasailing, and Boardwalk attractions like the water park.

“Are you the ones that called earlier? The young girls?”

“Yep, that’s us. I should probably be the spokesperson since I’m the one that’s eighteen,” said Madsy. “Don’t talk, Veda.”

Veda moved her fingers across her lips as if they were a zipper that she was closing. She stood by the brochure rack and browsed the available tourist activities while Madsy settled the deposit and got the room key from the clerk. One of the brochures was

an advertisement for a tour of the Pine Barrens for families who wanted to escape their busy New Jersey lives. She remembered the smoke from the forest fire that they had witnessed and forgot that she wasn't supposed to speak.

"Did you hear about the Pine Barrens fire?" Asked Veda.

"Veda, you're not supposed to talk," said Madsy, jokingly.

"Yeah, some kids were playing with fireworks or something," said the clerk.

"And with the drought, they set some dry trees on fire."

Veda couldn't understand why the forest fire seemed so normal to everyone. She was really surprised by all the smoke, and she was worried that it could have been any number of things. Everyone else seemed so unfazed by the incident; the radio reporter, the clerk, the other people in the cars on the Parkway, who never changed their speed, despite the danger ahead. And now all Madsy cared about was dinner.

"I'm really hungry," said Madsy, as the clerk handed her the key. "What do you want to do about food?"

"You don't have very many options," said the clerk. "Since the season hasn't officially started, you basically have pizza or burgers. Breakfast will be good though. You can go out for pancakes at The Admiral."

Veda had been looking forward to eating some unhealthy food once she and Madsy got to Wildwood. She rarely treated herself to anything high in fat or calories, and she wanted to eat unhealthy food with her best friend on the night of what was supposed to be their prom. But she didn't feel like eating anything now, and she couldn't understand why she had felt so sick and overwhelmed in the car; she felt like blaming herself for all the uncertainty that she had experienced up to that point in the day.

She wondered again if they had made the right decision about skipping prom. She thought about how happy Susanne had looked picking up her prom dress at Neiman Marcus, and she wondered if she could have mustered up the same amount of excitement about a prom dress too. Their classmates were probably taking pre-prom pictures as they spoke to the clerk, with their dates standing awkwardly next to them in front of someone's pool. If she really had wanted to go, she thought, she could have found a date; someone could have set her up. She wondered why she had given up so easily on the possibility.

"I have a stomachache right now," Veda announced.

"Will you come somewhere with me at least?" Madsy asked. "You don't have to eat if you don't feel well."

"Yeah. The drive took a lot out of me."

"Where did you girls come from?" Asked the clerk.

"Morris County," said Veda.

"Oh, so are mommy and daddy paying for your night out?"

"No, we're paying for it. And we're going to order some take-out. With our own money. That way we won't have to drive anywhere else. And waste gas. That we paid for," said Madsy.

"There are a ton of take-out menus over here," said Veda, trying to ignore the jerky clerk. Madsy picked up a take-out menu for an Italian sub shop on Crocus Street, and the clerk nodded. Veda knew that Madsy was trying to please her because Veda loved sandwiches, and Veda would generally eat them, even if she wasn't feeling well.

“Can we use your phone?” Madsy asked. “Or will you charge our mommy and daddy?”

“You girls ask a lot don’t you,” said the clerk, pushing the phone toward them. Madsy ordered two Italian cold cut sandwiches, even though she didn’t think that Veda was going to eat her sandwich, and gave the delivery person the address for the motel then carried their bags to their room and waited for the delivery person to arrive. The room had two queen-size beds, a mini fridge, a bathroom that smelled like salt water, and a shaggy carpet with sand in the fibers. A poster of a carousel was hanging on the wall above the beds, and the lamp on the nightstand between the beds was a carousel horse with a lampshade on it. It was all so nursery-like, and Veda felt like she was in a little kid’s room, despite the fact that her and her friend had done the grown-up thing of purchasing a hotel room for a night.

After about ten minutes, the delivery person arrived with the sandwiches. It had become cold and windy outside, but Veda and Madsy put on their sweatshirts, brought the bottle of chardonnay and the extra blanket in the closet in their room, and went out to the beach with their food. Veda wasn’t feeling well and wanted to go to sleep, but Madsy had her heart set on eating in the lifeguard chair.

The sand was cold under their feet, and everything was quiet except for the rolling of the waves. In the distance, they could see stars clearly and the lights from some boats on the horizon. The sky wasn’t completely clear, and some smudges of clouds were visible like the smoke that they had seen over the Pine Barrens. Veda became nervous again at the memory. The sky and the water were both so dark that they could barely see

the horizon save for the lights on it. Other than the boats, the sky and water seemed to blend into one big, black mass.

They climbed onto a lifeguard chair and covered their dangling legs with the blanket. They opened the sandwich wrappers on their lap and opened the bottle of wine, placing it between them on the chair and sipping it directly from the bottle. Once Veda opened the sandwich wrapper, she decided that it smelled good, especially the oil, vinegar, and oregano, and she told herself that she would eat a little bit because she was hungry and didn't want to wake up in the middle of the night with hunger pangs.

"I'm going to ask you again," said Veda. "Do you think we made the right decision?"

"About prom? About coming down here? The sandwiches?"

"Prom. Do you think we're going to regret it? We're not going to be in the class prom picture in the yearbook, and we won't be able to show our grandchildren pictures of our prom dresses."

"I don't know. We won't know that for many years. But aren't you having fun right now? Isn't this beautiful and peaceful?"

Veda took a few large swigs of the chardonnay and let it wash down the chunk of chewed Italian bread and salami in her mouth, hoping that she would start to feel a buzz soon, at least. She was really cold, sitting out on the lifeguard chair, even with the blanket, and she wanted to be distracted by the warmth of the alcohol. They heard boys talking behind them but when they turned around they could barely make out the outlines of two figures walking in the sand; one of the figures was holding a paper bag. The

voices approached them closer and closer, and whoever it was didn't seem to realize that anyone else was on the beach.

"Who goes there?" said Madsy, trying to act bold and unafraid. Veda knew that Madsy was a little nervous, and they were pretending to be cool about it. When the figures came closer, Veda could see that they were two teenage boys about the same age as them, and they looked very similar, like brothers or almost twins.

"We just came out here to shoot some fireworks we bought last weekend in Pennsylvania. Would you ladies like to join us?"

"Nah, we'll just watch," said Veda. Fireworks made her nervous, and she didn't want to have anything to do with them, especially since no one knew that she and Madsy were in Wildwood. Fireworks did things like start fires in the Pine Barrens and create large black clouds in the sky. She didn't want one of them to blow off her head.

"Okay, well we've never done this before."

The boy holding the bag put it down on the sand, and the other boy pulled out a Roman candle from the bag and a matchbook from the back pocket of his jeans. They walked about fifty feet away from the lifeguard chair, and the boy with the fireworks put it in the sand. The other boy lit one of the matches, but it went out before he could light the Roman candle. The ocean breeze wasn't any help keeping the matches lit. He tried three matches before he was able to light the tip of the Roman candle. Once they saw that the Roman candle was lit, both of them panicked and ran away from the fireworks back to the girls. The girls watched as the Roman candle didn't launch but blew up in the sand instead, making a large explosion right above the ground.

“That wasn’t very impressive,” said Veda. “I was expecting the kind of thing you see in the Fourth of July show.”

Madsy nodded her head, and the boys took it personally, as an injury to their egos.

“Oh, we have more,” said the first boy.

They took the other Roman candle and stuck it in the sand right beside the one that had exploded. This time, the Roman candle launched about 100 feet into the air and exploded like the first one should have exploded. This one was impressive and bright and loud. The girls were actually surprised at how much a commotion the firework had made in the air; it seemed to echo against the waves. But the boys didn’t come back; they left the paper bag in the sand and ran back toward the motels, leaving Madsy and Veda in the lifeguard chair with the specks of remembered light in their eyes. The firework had been so bright that it actually hurt their eyes.

“That was strange,” said Madsy.

“Whatever, they made me nervous anyway,” said Veda. “They left their bag too.”

After a few minutes, Veda and Madsy saw headlights coming toward them on the beach. They didn’t think anything of it because they weren’t breaking any rules; they were allowed to be on the beach after dark, as long as they weren’t swimming. The beach patrol usually made rounds up and down the beach, just to make sure everything was okay. The small, all-terrain vehicle came toward them, and the girls could see two young men driving the car. They were wearing lifeguard tank-tops, despite the cold, and Veda and Madsy could see their bulging shoulder and muscles.

“Do you girls know that shooting fireworks in New Jersey is illegal?” The lifeguards shouted up to them.

“We don’t have fireworks,” said Madsy. “Two boys shot them.”

“Where are the boys?”

“We don’t know,” said Veda. The lifeguards waved for Veda and Madsy to come down from the chairs and asked to see their identification. One of the lifeguards went over to the paper bag in the sand and found a remaining Roman candle.

“Possession of fireworks is also illegal in New Jersey. We’re going to have to ask you both to climb on the back of our car and come to beach patrol headquarters with us.”

“But those aren’t our fireworks!” said Veda. “Some boys left them there.”

“You don’t have any proof of that.” Said one lifeguard, looking over the girl’s driver licenses.

“So one of you is eighteen and the other is seventeen,” said the other lifeguard.

“Madsy, we’re going to have to fine you fifty dollars, and Veda, we’re going to have to call your parents.”

Veda’s headache and nausea returned at the prospect of the coast guard calling her parents, who had no idea that she and Madsy were in Wildwood. She wondered if there was any possible way they could get those boys to fess up to owning the fireworks, but Veda realized she had no experience with getting a boy to come back.

Not Homecoming

When Veda returned to her apartment from her final Friday class, she asked her roommate Courtney to do the special stretches with her. They had found an instructional DVD at a local video store that showed women how to do erotic stretching in preparation for sex, and they had bought it partially because it was funny but also because they were curious. Veda thought she should be prepared for Arthur, and she wanted to impress him with her limberness.

Wearing sweatpants, Veda and Courtney sat on the floor in their common room and did the stretches for exactly ten minutes so that Veda would have enough time to shave her legs, wash, condition, and blow-dry her hair, and then to ask Allison to do her makeup the way Veda liked it for formal events.

While Allison did Veda's makeup, Veda called Madsy in New York City. Madsy had already lost her virginity so she should know, even though she didn't know Arthur very well, because during most of the time that Veda had spent with Arthur in New Jersey, Madsy was working as a fact-checker intern at a non-fiction literary journal in Manhattan.

"Can I stay with you if things with Arthur don't work out?" Asked Veda.

“Of course. Just remember how lucky you are to be losing your virginity to someone who loves you,” said Madsy. “Consider yourself lucky.”

At Union Station in Washington, DC, Veda boarded an Amtrak train to Newark Penn Station in New Jersey. Veda had done everything possible to ensure that no one, except for Arthur, Madsy, and Veda’s college roommates, would know about this weekend getaway. She didn’t even buy an actual train ticket, worried that her parents would be able to track her purchase. Instead, she redeemed a voucher from a train ticket that she had never used.

It was October, and the air was just starting to get chilly; it would be even colder in the Garden State than in DC, she knew. She liked that her makeup wouldn’t be ruined by sweat; cold weather set makeup perfectly. She had even bought a new pair of black silky panties because she thought it was the right thing to do. The only thing she worried about was her long blond hair, which she had spent forty-five minutes blow-drying. The wind made her hair look stringy, and she was sure that the breeze from the passing train would ruin it even more. Veda applied her favorite perfume, a vanilla musk, to all her pressure points, so that Arthur would notice it when they cuddled that night. More than anything, she was looking forward to cuddling up next to Arthur in his bed.

When the train arrived at the platform, Veda held her hair in place and then scrambled to find an empty seat without working up a sweat. She had to sit in the snack car because all the other cars were taken. She sat across from another college student with a familiar face and a sweatshirt that she had seen on display at the college bookstore, but she didn’t know who the boy was. He was shuffling through his wallet, trying to figure out how much cash he had, and she noticed a ticket stub from her school’s

September welcome-back concert. She wanted to say something but felt shy; Veda told herself that she would ask him about school if he remained in the snack car after five minutes. She looked at her watch and waited.

In the meantime, Veda rifled through her traveling backpack. She was carrying a small, pink book called *Your Guide to the Pill*, which she had planned to read on the train if it wasn't so crowded, and a sketchpad. She removed the sketchpad and a pencil and began to draw a caricature of the college kid that sat across from her; he had ordered two cans of beer from the snack bar. He was wearing a New York Yankees baseball cap and an expensive-looking watch on his wrist. She thought, initially, that he wouldn't be very interesting to draw. She tilted the sketchpad toward her so that he couldn't see what she was drawing, and he didn't seem to notice that she kept glancing quickly at him from over the paper, making brief lines with her pencil.

"Want to crush these cans for me?" He asked. She was surprised that he had decided to speak to her first. Boys her age never talked to her. But it was probably because they saw Veda's prejudice: Veda hated college boys from privileged families and lots of opportunities because they were the most uninteresting. But she was intimidated by them too because they usually had a lot of pretenses and were difficult to gauge, despite their outward predictability.

Arthur had intimidated Veda too, when she first met him, because he was two years older than her. They were at a country western dancing bar in rural New Jersey with some of Arthur's friends. By the end of the night of their first date, after a girl who had dismounted a mechanical bull said that she "almost popped her cherry" from riding

the bull so hard, Arthur had told her that he once “almost” lost his virginity to an ex girlfriend.

“What does ‘almost’ mean?” she had asked.

“Well, we sort of got to moving the right parts together, but it never really qualified as sex.”

Being the virgin that she was, Veda had been nervous about dating an experienced older boy, but she liked the fact that Arthur wasn’t too experienced. That had been the summer before Veda’s sophomore year of college, when Veda thought that she and Arthur would not outlive the status of “summer item.” She was okay with that because she knew it would make for a good story that she could tell her friends at school. She never expected Arthur to be her boyfriend, and she certainly never anticipated losing her virginity to him.

“No, I’m okay,” said Veda to the college boy. “I hope you know where you’re going. Because by the time you get there, you are going to be very drunk.”

“I’m going to New York. Where are you going?”

“Not to New York. Don’t expect me to take care of you,” said Veda. As she put away her sketchpad, she thought that maybe she had forgotten to take her pill, even though she set her cell phone alarm to go off at noon every day, to remind her. She had been in such a rush after going to class, with packing, and making herself look pretty, and trying to get to the train station. She frantically tore through her bag and found the little makeup case where she kept her pill packet. Friday’s pill was missing, which meant that she had taken it. She was relieved.

Not only did Veda want to be completely sure that Arthur was the boy that was good enough to take her virginity, but she also wanted to make sure that her body would be protected; she was more terrified of getting pregnant than of getting a nasty STD because she knew that Arthur had never slept with anyone else before. She started taking the birth control pill months before, specifically to prepare for the event.

“What if I want to take care of you? Can I buy you a beer?” He asked Veda. She scanned the crowded car and noticed the sleepy-looking passengers. The car was quiet and sealed off, as if they were living inside of a fluorescent light powered vacuum. Each person had their own way of fending off the outside world; many wore headphones, some wore ear plugs, a few wore eye masks, others stared out the window, and some were lost in a book or newspaper.

Veda saw that he was the only person drinking, besides a middle-aged woman with a large rhinestone-studded purse and a mini bottle of wine. Was he serious? Was it the job of every twenty-something male to turn every place possible into a bar because that was the only way they knew how to socialize?

“You can get me a Diet Coke, if you want.”

Veda hated the taste of beer, and she was convinced that drinking even a little would make her fat. The guy bought a can of soda for her and brought her a cup filled with ice. She was surprised and grateful that he actually got her a soda. “Thanks.”

“I’m Theo, by the way,” said the guy. “I was supposed to come home with some of my friends, but they ditched me and now I’m all by myself.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Veda. I think we go to the same school, actually.”

“How do you know that?” Theo asked.

“Because of your sweatshirt.” Veda was a junior now, and she had only befriended a handful of guys at her school. Because she and her girlfriends never went to the popular bars, her male friends were people that lived in her dorm or who had a lot of classes with her. Instead of going to bars like a lot of other girls at their school, Veda and her roommates would watch music videos and knit scarves. They also cooked a lot and liked to bake things for the boys who lived across the hall; those were the only boys they really ever had contact with, and they were the types of boys who spent a lot of time playing video games with the blinds down. Meeting a guy from outside of her social or academic circle was rare. She wasn’t sure about this opportunity with Theo.

“Oh, I’ve never seen you. I’m a junior.”

“I’m a sophomore,” said Veda. As they chatted a little more, Veda and Theo started to realize that they had some mutual friends and that they actually had crossed paths before but never really realized it.

“You should party with us,” Theo said. “We always welcome hot chicks. Can I have your number? When we get back to school, I can call you.”

“Okay, sure.” Veda said, only because she didn’t want to seem uncool. She wondered if he was indirectly calling her hot or if it was his way of requesting she bring hot friends to his party. She was still at the point in her life that she had such little experience with men that any request for her phone number was flattering. Veda had not yet learned how to be judicious and honest about her intentions, mostly because she didn’t really know what she wanted. She wasn’t really sure if she wanted Theo to call her, especially since it would probably rouse suspicion with Arthur. But still, she was

flattered that he asked her so she wrote her phone number on a piece of paper that she tore from her sketchbook and gave it to him.

Just then, one of the train employees who was checking tickets came up to Theo, took one look at the beer cans on the table, and asked to see Theo's ID.

"I packed it away in my suitcase, sir," said Theo.

"How did you purchase beer?" Asked the Amtrak employee.

"The man didn't ask me for my ID," he answered.

"I'm sorry, but I can't let you continue to drink if you can't prove that you're of legal age." The man picked up the cans to test whether any liquid remained and then put them on the snack bar counter for the attendant to recycle. "Also, I'm going to have to ask you to come with me."

As the employee escorted Theo to another mysterious location within the train, Theo turned around and waved to Veda. He was probably going somewhere better than the snack car, she thought, wondering how boys always seemed to get the better end of the stick, no matter what, even if they were in trouble. Also, she was so surprised to have actually met and spoken to someone from her own school and class year, someone she didn't already know. She kind of was curious about Theo's "sick" parties, even though she and her friends generally avoided them. Secretly, Veda always hoped she might be missing something, even though she knew she wasn't missing anything at all.

With Theo gone, Veda could worry more about what her weekend with Arthur would bring. Arthur and Veda had dated for over a year and still hadn't had sex yet. They had done everything besides sex, but Veda was usually on the receiving end only because she had so much difficulty with Arthur. She wanted to please him, but it was

difficult and exhausting for her, and she never knew what she was doing wrong. She could go down on him for forty-five minutes and nothing would happen; most of the time, his penis would be soft, and she would ask him what she could do to make it better, but he always just said that he didn't know and felt embarrassed that he couldn't ejaculate for her.

She had been worried about how they would successfully have sex if Arthur couldn't stay hard, and seeing Veda nervous would probably just make Arthur more flaccid. But that was part of the deal they made: Veda would go through the experiencing of visiting the gynecologist for the first time and get her prescription for birth control pills if Arthur would go to the doctor and get his penis checked out.

The doctor actually recommended that Arthur try one of the latest erectile dysfunction pills on the market, even though it was meant for older men. Arthur didn't argue with the doctor; he was willing to try anything to solve his inability to stay hard for Veda. Veda was shocked when he told her, because she really wasn't expecting a prescription to be the outcome of his doctor's visit. But he had seemed excited about the pills so she didn't argue.

When Veda arrived in Newark, Arthur met her in front of Penn Station by the taxi stand, in an old Buick that his uncle gave him as a 21st birthday present. When Arthur saw Veda, he got out of the car and hugged her and kissed her and took her duffel bag and threw it in the back seat quickly because cab drivers were honking at him to move out of the way. They were in such a rush that Arthur barely got to kiss her. Veda was annoyed that he was clean-shaven; she liked him better when he was a little bit rugged and unkempt, wearing his fleece pants and sweatshirt, with his dark hair messy and his

chin scratchy. But she understood too that he wanted to look formally presentable to her. By tomorrow morning, she thought, he would look the way she liked him to look.

He opened the door for Veda, and she basically fell into the car, trying to scramble inside as fast as she could. The leather seat on her side was cold, but she was so glad to see Arthur. He was familiar and reminded her of summer and of home. She hadn't seen him since the end of August, right before she moved back to school. They had suffered a long-distance relationship for that long, and now they were finally together. He smelled like summer to her, and she wanted to bury her face in his skin and stay there for as long as she possibly could.

"You look really amazing," said Arthur. Veda smiled but also wondered if he was crazy because her hair was a little messed up from the wind and from the traveling. She didn't have a chance to double-check her makeup in her mirror because she had forgotten her pocket mirror, and the train bathroom smelled too disgusting to enter. The only glimpse that she managed to get of herself was her reflection in the window on the train. But Veda liked that about love, that the other person thought you looked great no matter how ridiculous you thought you looked. It was almost stupid how enamoured Arthur was of Veda. It embarrassed her sometimes because she really didn't think she herself was that great.

As Arthur and Veda fell into their relationship, especially over the course of the previous summer, Veda realized why she had been hesitant to be with him in the first place. She knew he wasn't the right guy for her; he had dropped out of college, he had once done a lot of drugs, he still lived with his mom even though he was older than Veda, he had no idea what he wanted to do with his life, he liked slapstick comedy, and his

favorite activity was going to bars with his friends. But after spending time with Arthur and his easy-going, loyal self, she inevitably grew to like him and became dependent on him.

What she hated about love was the way it made her needy. It's bullshit, she thought, when people say that love is supposed to be free you, not make you needy. A person doesn't realize how much they start to depend on the fact that their lover loves them until it's too late.

For example, Veda couldn't eat ice cream or cookies unless Arthur was around because she thought she was going to get fat if she ate these things, except it didn't matter with Arthur because he would tell her that she was beautiful and that she would always be beautiful, even if she ate fifty cookies and gained some weight. So when Veda went to school and didn't have Arthur to encourage her to eat what she wanted, Veda lost a lot of weight.

She was hoping she could eat lots of sweet and fatty foods over the course of the weekend, because she missed them a lot. On their way to Arthur's house, they decided to stop at Chili's for dessert because Veda had already eaten a sandwich on the train, and Arthur watched her eat a brownie sundae while he drank a beer. Veda was kicking Arthur's foot under the table and kept looking around nervously to see if she knew anyone in the restaurant. They were right in her old neighborhood, where her parents and lots of her high school friends lived, but the eerie part was that no one knew that she was home. She was nervous that she might see her parents, who would be really mad at her for sneaking around without their knowledge.

“What if my parents decide to come here to eat tonight? I don’t even know what they would say.”

“If your parents are cool enough to come to Chili’s at nine on a Friday night, I don’t think they are the kind of parents who would care that you’re sneaking around with your very loving boyfriend.”

“I just don’t want to scare them. I think they’d be shocked.”

“They won’t come here,” said Arthur. “Do you think I should take the Viagra now? How long do you think it will take to kick in?”

Veda hoped that tonight wouldn’t be the night. When they would actually have sex was the only thing they hadn’t really talked about. They knew that this was going to be the weekend, but neither of them had discussed exactly when. Veda had this vision that they would spend some time together, have an awesome time and then go back to his room, laughing, but was this the time? They had all weekend to figure it out, and they would probably have to assign a good chunk of time to the act. But Veda was extremely tired, and her legs felt kind of sore from sitting on the cramped train for three hours and from the stretches she had done with Courtney. She hadn’t seen Arthur in over a month, and she felt estranged from him.

If they had sex now, she imagined that it would feel like it might feel during a one-night stand. If they were going to do it, she would have to feel really close to him. Also, after eating this ice cream sundae, she probably wouldn’t be in the mood to be naked. She hoped that he would understand.

“You think everyone in here knows that we’re going to have sex sometime this weekend?” Arthur asked. “I think we give off a certain energy.”

Veda was relieved that Arthur said “this weekend,” rather than “tonight,” but she couldn’t understand why she was worried in the first place because she knew Arthur wouldn’t pressure her to do anything. After Veda pushed her sundae away, and Arthur finished it for her and then paid the bill, they got in Arthur’s car and drove back to his house.

On the way, they stopped at 7-11 to buy condoms, just to have them on hand. The condoms in 7-11 were grouped with all the other necessary remedies like headache medicine and stomach medicine and sewing kits. The convenience store had three varieties of condoms: a flavor sampler pack, ultra thin, and one for guys with very large penises. Arthur let Veda decide, and she wondered if he was testing her. Did he want her to pick the magnum variety?

“I don’t know anything about condoms,” said Veda, as she took the ultra thin box from the rack, glad that she was taking the pill too because she couldn’t imagine an ultra thin condom actually working. She also didn’t want to flavor her most private parts. Veda got a diet soda, and Arthur got a taquito because he was going to cheat on his diet too while Veda was around.

“I’ve been working out so much lately, but now that you’re here for the weekend I might as well enjoy myself,” said Arthur.

Veda wasn’t really sure what Arthur was talking about because he looked like he gained some weight since the last time she saw him. His stomach protruded a little from over his jeans, which seemed to fit him tighter in the butt. Veda spent a lot of time obsessing about her looks and her body, and she wanted to be with someone who spent as

much time caring about his own body. Arthur was usually really good about it; they even went on long runs and bike rides together over the summer.

Before Arthur paid for their goods, Veda went to the cheese and chili machine and pressed the chili button so that brown goop fell from the machine. She always did this whenever she was at a 7-11, mostly because it made her feel like an easily-amused child. It was strangely satisfying to see the chili plop out on the hot dog wrapper that the owners left underneath the spout to catch any falling chili or cheese. Veda still felt so much like a kid, and she liked it. She couldn't go into stores like this without touching everything and laughing about how silly it all was.

While Arthur was paying, she flipped through the latest celebrity tabloid at the counter, trying to avoid the realization that buying condoms was something that grown-ups did.

The man behind the counter looked at Veda, and she knew that he knew that she was going to have sex. She did not like being looked at like that because she knew that the man was judging what Arthur and Veda were probably like in bed and whether or not they made a compatible couple. He was probably imagining her naked. She continued to focus on the celebrity tabloid magazine until Arthur received his change, which he put toward a lottery scratch-off ticket for good luck.

When they got to his mom's house, Arthur went inside first to make sure that the coast was clear and that there were no unforeseen problems. Arthur lived in a house in with his mom, and his sister and her fiancé, who lived in a separate apartment on the second floor. Arthur's house was about fifteen minutes from the house where Veda grew up but no longer actually lived. This made her feel like she was almost home. Arthur's

mom would be out of town, and Veda and Arthur would have his mom's house to themselves. They would finally express their love for one another; the situation was perfect because they would have privacy, and they were perfectly in love.

Veda stood outside in the dark driveway, waiting for Arthur and wondering if Theo really would call her. She tried not to raise her expectations too high. She completely expected him to lose the piece of paper on the train. Perhaps a stranger would call her when they found her number, or a teenager would prank call her. She definitely thought Theo was cute, and he wasn't as boring as he had initially seemed once she started talking to him.

The problem with most college-aged boys that she knew was that they just seemed so distant because they never really talked. But Veda realized that Theo was a real person who had made an interesting decision to get drunk on the train. Maybe he would call her and she could convince her roommates to go to a party with her. Maybe they would become party girls, after so much time being chaste and tame. She was open to the option.

Arthur returned to the front door and motioned for Veda to come inside. They ran up the stairs to his bedroom, and Arthur pushed Veda down onto his bed and started to kiss her. She loved kissing Arthur, but she was nervous that right now would be the time that he would want to have sex. She wondered if he had taken a Viagra when he went inside without her. Instead of closing her eyes, she looked up at the wall to see that Arthur had hung collage-style picture frames that hadn't been there over the summer. One was filled with photos of his friends and family, and the other filled with pictures of him and Veda. Veda didn't even know that Arthur had that many pictures of her, and she

was a little put off by her own overbearing presence in the room. Veda didn't have that many pictures of Arthur in her dorm room.

Over the summer, when Veda had been home for summer break and temporarily living with her parents, Veda and Arthur had spent so much time in Arthur's room. They had mutually agreed to wait before having sex because they weren't in any rush. They had become crazy about one another and would spend lots of time together. They had all the time in the world to have sex, and anyway, they weren't sure how sex would change their relationship.

Instead, they would take long bike rides, explore the back roads in his town, or sit outside by the town pool and come back to his house for snacks and rest. Arthur's bed was pushed into the corner of his room, which had blue painted walls with hockey memorabilia everywhere. He also had stuff from the college he attended as a freshman and then left because he had smoked too much marijuana and lost interest in school. Whenever Veda talked to Arthur about her own college experience, he used his one-year whirlwind college experience as a counterpoint.

"I've had such a long week," Veda said. "I just want to crawl into bed with you and sleep."

"That sounds good. I'm just so happy to see you. And I really missed kissing you," said Arthur.

To her relief, Arthur didn't try to convince Veda to do anything she didn't want to do, and Veda wondered how it was possible that he could be a male and still be so understanding of her and her fears and also of the fact that she wasn't sure about the whole sex and emotion thing. She didn't want to get pregnant. She was brought up with

Catholic ideals, and she used to think that she didn't even want to have sex before marriage. She even wrote an essay that argued against pre-marital sex for a high school Theology class. But perhaps having sex with Arthur was okay because she was pretty sure she wanted to marry him now. They were best friends, and she always felt so free when she was with him.

Veda knew she would love sex, eventually, but she was afraid of bleeding all over Arthur's bed, she was afraid of embarrassing herself, of being in pain. Veda didn't really want to go through with it, but she knew that if she had to lose her virginity, it would definitely be to Arthur, the guy who she loved. And she was so excited to get it over with so that they could start having fun and being adventurous, instead of talking about all the things they wanted to do or living vicariously through porn-stars when they watched porn together that summer on the VCR in Arthur's bedroom. They were so innocent despite their efforts to be naughty.

They went to his bathroom and brushed their teeth together, right next to one another. Veda removed her makeup and her contact lenses and washed her face. Arthur washed his face too, something that he never did, because he was inspired by Veda's girlish diligence. She missed the domesticity of getting ready for bed with Arthur. They had done it only a handful of times, but she liked it always. When they were ready to sleep, Veda and Arthur crawled into his bed, Arthur in his boxers and Veda in her sexy black silk panties, which Arthur didn't even seem to notice.

Arthur put on a porn movie, the one with the Catholic school-girl and the horny bus driver. In addition to a pretty, gold bracelet, Arthur had bought the porno for Veda for her birthday, as a gag because he knew that she went to a Catholic school and liked to

joke that Veda was sexually repressed. Every time Arthur made the joke about Veda wanting desperately to hike up her plaid skirt, Veda sometimes wondered if it was true.

The sexy school girl in the video was definitely not seventeen; she looked more like she was thirty-two, and the nuns would have expelled Veda if she ever showed up to school with her white collared shirt tied in a knot under her breasts to expose her tummy. Veda tried really hard to be aroused by the paunchy, tattooed bus driver with the wool hat, but he just didn't do it for her. Arthur started to rub Veda's crotch over her panties, but she was actually afraid of becoming aroused; it might give Arthur the signal to continue. She closed her eyes and pretended to sleep until Arthur stopped, and she did fall asleep.

The next morning, Veda woke up and couldn't figure out, for a moment, where she was. She was startled to open her eyes and see Arthur lying beside her, still sleeping. She was also confused when she reached her hand over her to feel for her glasses and they weren't on a nightstand like they were in her college dorm. She had placed them on the floor, under the bed, to protect them, but had completely forgotten.

Her head hurt. It was stuffy in the room. Arthur had left the space-heater on, even though it wasn't that cold, and they had fallen asleep with the heating unit drying out the air in the room. They had left the porno movie on too, and the television was flashing the DVD menu with a looping video of the Catholic school-girl in orgasmic bliss. Veda laughed to herself and thought that she had never felt that good in high school.

The inside of Veda's mouth tasted sour. Now she could understand the girls she overheard in public bathrooms at school; she knew what it was like to wake up in a

strange bed, completely disoriented. She wanted to get up and eat something; her stomach was growling, despite the brownie sundae she had eaten late the night before. She tried to kiss Arthur on the cheek and then on his ear, but he just rolled his face away from her and moved his hand to his cheek, mumbling something under his breath.

She reached under the bed for her glasses and got up to turn off the space heater. Veda didn't want to crawl back into bed with Arthur. She hated being around people who were sleeping, especially when she should be sleeping. From the little experience that Veda had with sleeping men, she felt that, in general, they slept more peacefully than she did. They could sleep anywhere, on command, through everything.

Instead, she sat in Arthur's desk chair and looked through some of the things on his desk. He had a line-up of "airplane" bottles of hard alcohol, from rum to Jack Daniel's to Bailey's. There was a whole collection of shot glasses from different places and VIP passes from spring break parties that he had visited with his friends, even though he no longer had spring breaks. She saw plane ticket stubs and paycheck stubs. Veda had never done the typical spring break, and she had no desire to do so.

In his private life, away from Veda, Arthur was exactly like what she imagined Theo to be, like those boys that Veda didn't like. But Veda never saw that side of Arthur because Veda and Arthur didn't go to school together and because Arthur cared about Veda enough to try to impress her all the time and appeal to her sensibilities. She knew that he went out with his friends when she was away at school, and this was okay with her because she trusted him, as long as he didn't call her when he was drunk.

But he did so frequently, and it made her sad. When Arthur went out with his friends, he was really good at pretending he wasn't drunk, so he would call her at the end

of a night of partying, and she would usually believe that he was sober. It wouldn't be until the next morning that she would suspect he had been wasted the night before, when he couldn't remember things that she had told him over the phone. Sometimes Veda thought it was unfair that she was upholding such a high standard for herself while her boyfriend got away with a lot, but Veda knew that she was uptight in general. So Veda spent a lot of time pretending that Arthur had already been through his wild, young man phase and that he was completely devoted to her and the relationship and to being responsible and real at all times.

Arthur finally opened his eyes and reached his hands toward Veda.

"Baby, why are you over there? Come back to bed," he said, almost incoherently.

"Oh my gosh, why is it so hot in here?"

"We left the heater on by accident," said Veda. "So I woke up and couldn't go back to sleep. I'm surprised you were able to sleep with the temperature."

"I'm just so comfortable with you that it doesn't matter," said Arthur. Veda wondered if there would ever be a day that she could sleep with a man in bed and not feel the least bit awkward, jarred, uncomfortable, or violated.

She crawled back under the covers with him, and he wrapped her up in his arms and began to kiss her. The one thing that Veda noticed about being in a long distance relationship was how much it made her appreciate the impact of touch. Because she went for long periods of time without seeing Arthur, she could observe how her body reacted to the close proximity of his body after long bouts of separation. He put his hand around her midsection, and she felt small, like he could transport her and keep her near. She remembered her shape and her presence. It was as if his arms were drawing an outline

for her. They represented what she was doing with a pencil on the page when she tried to draw people's bodies, and she could appreciate the effort.

It was amazing how wound up and tense she would get in those periods of Arthur's absence, with her away at school, away from everything that she loved, especially away from Arthur in New Jersey; when he touched her now, she felt like every single muscle in her body was untying itself from a serious of knots, as if her insides were a mess of necklaces neglected in the bottom of a dresser for many years: tarnished, dull, and tangled. When he touched her, everything that had been jumbled inside her suddenly ordered itself into neat little rows.

When Arthur kissed her, he seemed to her to be the best kisser in the world. His tongue was so familiar in her mouth that it could pacify her. She could get really turned on when she was with him, if she just let it happen. She would become so wet that she felt embarrassed for whatever panties or pants she was wearing because they would be soaked through the fabric. She would forget about everything else, but it was difficult for Veda to fully let because she had never had sex before.

When the passion reached a certain point, she couldn't be everything that she should be in the moment, she couldn't act in accordance to how she felt because she didn't want to give it away too easily or become accidentally pregnant.

With Arthur, she felt mostly safe. She could let herself go to a certain degree because she knew it wouldn't get past a certain point. They had already agreed that they would wait until they were both ready to lose their virginity to one another. But then she remembered that they were going to lose their virginity this weekend, and she became really afraid. This morning might be it, she thought, and then she decided to be tough

and go with it, to let it happen to her, even though she could already tell that she was losing her sense of arousal.

She tried to imprint the moment in her mind because she knew this would be something that she would want to remember forever. She was nineteen years old, and she was a sophomore in college, and she was going to do it with the person that she loved most in the world. She couldn't think of a better story to tell her friends, many of whom had not been as lucky as her; they had lost their virginity in strange situations with guys that didn't deserve to take it from them. She had to remember that she was wearing the black silky panties that she had bought specifically for the occasion and that she was in Arthur's bedroom in northern New Jersey, probably the place that she loved most in the world. It was almost as if she was losing her virginity to her home, if there was such an idea.

Veda was going through all the motions as Arthur kissed her from above. He was moving his hands under her camisole and rolling her right nipple between his fingers. He always did this; he got caught up with one breast and always forgot about the other. Veda wondered if he liked one more than the other or if he was just completely into the moment and forgot. She was trying to convince herself to relax. Mentally, she was looking at the collage of pictures on the wall, focusing on a picture of her and Arthur in Wildwood. The beach always made her calm. She tried to pretend that the heat from the space heater was like the heat on the beach as Arthur covered her with his own heat, pulling off her camisole and moving the panties down over her hips.

She remembered to make some noises so that Arthur would know that she was interested. She channeled the Catholic school-girl in the video, but toned down the

volume so that she wouldn't seem like she was trying too hard to be sexy and dirty.

Other than the movement of their bodies under his bedsheet and the breathing and the noises that Veda was trying to make, the room and the house were completely silent. She either wanted to get this over with or she wanted something to happen so that they could postpone the act and just give up for now and go to the bagel place to get some egg and cheese sandwiches. She couldn't even remember the last time she had an egg and cheese sandwich, and she could really go for one. Arthur took off his boxers and started to rub against her.

"I love you, Veda," he said. "I'm so glad you are here today. I missed you so much."

"I love you too," she said, still staring at the collage of photographs, trying to remember other times when she felt happier and more comfortable. Her eye kept returning to the beach photograph. Arthur found his jeans, which he had thrown over his desk chair the night before and took the box of condoms out of his pocket. He ripped open the cardboard.

"Do you want to do it?" Arthur asked her. She wasn't sure if he meant having sex or putting the condom on him.

"What? No." She didn't want to do either, at least not now.

"Okay, I can do it." He carefully opened the foil wrapper and unrolled the condom over his penis. She looked at his latex covered dick, which was glistening from the lubricant. She thought about how sterile it seemed and about her first gynecologist appointment, which she had to endure in order to get birth control pills. She thought about the female doctor who had asked the nurse to stand next to her as she examined

Veda, with her feet in the stirrups and her legs spread wide. The nurse squirted lubricant onto the latex covered finger of the doctor, who examined Veda's vagina while the nurse and the doctor talked about the weather, literally. Arthur might as well have been Veda's gynecologist.

Before he tried to enter her, he rubbed his condom-covered penis over the general area. To Veda, it felt like driving carefully in the rain, when she hit the brakes on a wet puddle, and the car skid a little but she pressed the brakes for dear life, hoping it would stop. Veda did not like the feeling; she would have preferred his bare skin against hers; the latex-covered penis was just warm, not skin-like at all. The condom felt like a mistake, and she was just about to tell him to take it off, but she didn't trust the birth control pill yet, and she was still afraid of getting pregnant.

"Do you want me to get some lube?" Arthur had apparently stored lubricant in his nightstand.

"No, that's okay." Veda felt so tense. As he tried to push into her, it was as if she didn't even have a vagina at all because she was clenching her muscles so tightly.

"Wow, you're really tight," said Arthur. "Are you supposed to be that tight? That's pretty hot."

"It doesn't feel good. It doesn't feel like it's going to go in." Veda had been clenching her muscles so tightly that she needed a release and started to cry, given that it was her only possible option. She wasn't going to have an orgasm any time soon.

"What's wrong? You're not supposed to cry," said Arthur. He rolled off of her and lay beside her, pulling her close to him and stroking her hair. "Please don't cry. We don't have to do it now. I thought you wanted to."

“I don’t know. I’m sorry. I just lost it.”

“You still want to do this, right?” Asked Arthur.

Veda didn’t even know why it mattered so much anymore because after this weekend she would return to school and probably not see Arthur again until Thanksgiving, at the end of November. By that time, having sex with him would probably just seem like losing her virginity again because they would never actually have a chance to get used to the idea and the act. Her last memory of Arthur would be one of physical pain, and she really didn’t want to have to deal with that for a month and a half at school, where she only had her roommates, who were great but weren’t Madsy, the only person who would know exactly what she meant.

“Yes, I’m just really nervous. I don’t know why I’m so nervous.”

“Let’s go get some breakfast,” said Arthur. He didn’t seem mad or upset or disappointed, just calm and concerned about why Veda was crying. “Will egg and cheese make you feel better?”

Finally, Veda thought, Arthur was on the same wavelength as her. Arthur and Veda got dressed, and they got into his Buick to go to the bagel place and Quick Chek for flavored coffee. She felt like she was on vacation but at her home because no one knew where she was. She had been to these places a million times before, they were so familiar to her that even the cashier at the bagel place still remembered Veda’s name and greeted her when she came in. They even knew exactly what kind of breakfast sandwich she would want to order. She had to look around and make sure she didn’t know anyone else. She was like a paranoid fugitive in her own home.

They decided to bring the bagels and coffee to Verona Park and have a breakfast picnic. The weather was pleasant enough, and they had spent too much time cooped up inside together. They rented a paddle-boat, and Arthur snuck the bag with the bagels under his thick, fleece zip-up jacket so that the paddle-boat attendant wouldn't question them for bringing food out to the lake and possibly littering. They rented a boat for an hour and rode out to the middle of the river, at which point Arthur took the paper bag out from under his jacket, and Veda and Arthur began to eat their sandwiches. The coffee was nice because it was a little chilly out on the water, and it kept their hands warm.

"Do you still feel uncomfortable?" Asked Arthur. Crumbs from the bagel were falling onto his fleece jacket, and Veda was annoyed that he didn't think to be more careful.

"I'm a little sore," said Veda. Veda started to paddle faster, even though her legs still hurt. The coffee gave her some extra energy too, even though she was tired from lack of a good night's sleep. She remembered the brownie sundae from the night before and now the bagel, and she was hoping that she could burn extra calories by paddling quickly. The little boat moved swiftly across the water, scaring the geese that were floating by and kicking up droplets of water behind it. "But I guess that's how it's supposed to be."

"Remember that time we borrowed my brother-in-laws jet ski in Wildwood? That was way more exciting than this little boat. You were sitting behind me and even then you were complaining how hard it was to see with the water blowing up in your face."

Veda remembered very well. Her eyes had been stinging from the salt water, but she wanted to be brave because it was fun, despite her discomfort on the jetski. She kept

ignoring the pain and the blindness because she wanted to show Arthur that she was capable of enjoying things, without complaining or worrying, like she usually did. It was a great experience, in the end, but she lost one of her contact lenses in the commotion and had to ask her parents to mail her new ones because she was staying in Wildwood for a week with Madsy; she didn't want to have to explain that she had been riding a jetski with Arthur and that was the reason she lost her contact lens because they didn't know Arthur was even there. Veda's parents would never have let her go on vacation with a boy, even if other people were present.

Veda's cell phone, which she had kept in the pocket of her sweatshirt, began to vibrate. The phone number on the display was one that she didn't recognize. She decided to answer it in case someone was wondering about where she was; then at least she could lie instead of not answering the phone and making someone worried that she had disappeared. The last thing Veda wanted to do was make anyone worry about her when she was sneaking around. She shushed Arthur and told him not to make any noise because she was going to answer the phone and had to pretend that she was actually in Washington, DC, not on a lake in Verona Park in New Jersey.

"Hello?" She pressed the phone close to her ear and cupped her hand around the mouthpiece so as not to allow any outside noises to be heard.

"Hi, who is this?" asked the young man's voice, on the other end.

"Um, you're calling me," said Veda.

"I met you on the train last night, but I couldn't remember your name. I wanted to ask you so that I could put your name in my address book."

Veda hesitated. She couldn't say anything with Arthur sitting right next to her, but she knew that the person on the phone was Theo. She was completely surprised that he had actually called her, especially so soon after her encounter with him; didn't boys have to wait like two days before they would call back? Wasn't that the rule?

"Oh yes, can I call you back in a little while? I am losing reception. I can't really hear you," said Veda and then hung up the phone.

"Who was that? Is everything okay?" Arthur asked.

"Oh yeah, it was my roommate. She just wanted to make sure I was safe, but I couldn't really hear her. There must be bad reception out here, in the middle of the lake. I don't know. She called me from a strange number."

Veda quickly saved the number in her phone so that she could call Theo back later, when Arthur was in the bathroom or something, to explain the mix-up and make sure that Theo knew who she was.

"Do you still want to do it this weekend? I was really concerned when you were crying."

"Yes, I'm sorry. I just hadn't slept well, and I started thinking too much. And I was also really hungry. I felt lightheaded, almost."

"Okay, Veda, you just make me nervous sometimes. I want you to know that I'm not pressuring you to do anything that you don't want to do. Okay?"

Sometimes Arthur's perpetual understanding actually annoyed Veda. Why wouldn't he force her to do something? It might actually make it easier for her if he pushed himself on her, but she had complete control. She was stuck in a constant state of overthinking and suffered from an inability to perform. If he just went ahead and did it,

everything would be a lot easier and she could just get it over with so that they could start enjoying sex and become even closer as a couple than they already were, which Veda thought was nearly impossible.

“I have a surprise for you,” said Arthur.

“What’s that?” Asked Veda.

“I got two tickets to see the New York Rangers at Madison Square Garden tonight. We can go into the city with a plan besides sitting around in my room. How does that sound?”

As excited as Veda always was to have an excuse to go into the city, she did not like hockey. Arthur had made her watch it on TV a few times, and she just didn’t get it. She hated cold weather, she hated ice, and she was not a big sports fan. Baseball she could watch, but hockey seemed stupid. Boys were stupid too, she thought. Why did they assume that it was okay to drag their girlfriends into their hobbies? Veda never made Arthur look at her art books or talk to him about art theory or anything like that. She would show him her drawings sometimes, but she would never ever force him to watch an episode of Bob Ross’ *The Joy of Painting* with her. But maybe that was the trick, to test your significant other with your quirky interests.

“Sounds like fun!” said Veda, feigning excitement. She agreed to go to the city with him because it would buy them time and keep them out of Arthur’s room for a while. She wanted to get out, to enjoy Manhattan; maybe she could find a way to convince Madsy to meet up. It was true she wouldn’t be happy about the hockey game but maybe it was in her best interest to go.

They returned the paddleboat and went back to Arthur's house to shower and prepare for the trip to Manhattan. In Arthur's bathroom, Arthur slowly pulled off Veda's sweatshirt and wrapped his arms around her to keep her warm. Arthur took off his own clothes, and Veda adjusted the water temperature until she felt like she would be comfortable. She liked the water hot, and Arthur wanted her to be comfortable.

They stepped over the side of the tub and stood under the stream of water together, holding each other closely so that the water ran between them and over their chests, as if they were statues in the middle of a fountain, stuck. They massaged shampoo into one another's scalps as if they were an old couple, taking care of one another's hygiene, less concerned with immediacy and passion and more worried about care and comfort.

Maybe it was too late, Veda thought. Maybe her and Arthur had missed the honeymoon period, the first few months of bliss and passion that couples are supposed to experience when they meet. Arthur and Veda had never given in to the urges they had to have sex with one another because it was still uncharted territory. Veda worried that maybe now they would never have great sex. She looked at the tiles in the shower and remembered how she had helped Arthur fix up his bathroom over the summer in exchange for an expensive dinner at the local hibachi restaurant. They had been so domestic, so close, yet so eerily like a married couple that she feared she would never have the rip-your-clothes-off urgency that she wanted from sex, at least from the sex she thought she should be having in her 20s.

Arthur tried to finger Veda, while they kissed under the stream of the water, the water rushing into whatever gaps they couldn't seal off with their lips, but her own

wetness was washed away by the water from the showerhead, which seemed almost dry in comparison.

“That doesn’t feel good,” she whispered, water filling her mouth. But the discomfort actually comforted her, in a way. Arthur didn’t hear her over the noise of the shower, and he continued to finger her. Discomfort was just that, a feeling, it wasn’t real. Her reaction to pain determined the outcome. Veda felt suddenly brave, like she knew that she would have to go through with the sex by the end of the weekend or else suffer regret and disappointment with herself. How was she supposed to start enjoying sex if she wouldn’t let herself have it? She became numb, assertive, and brave; she put her hand on Arthur’s penis.

He understood. Arthur rinsed the soap and shampoo off of Veda’s shoulders and shut off the water. This time, when Arthur pushed her down on his bed, on top of his comforter, she didn’t even give him a chance to pull the comforter over them. She grabbed his ass as he kissed her from on top and she wrapped her legs around the backs of his knees. Veda was more determined than turned on. She pulled him close to her so that she could feel him become hard on her crotch. So far, she felt no pain, and she relished in the tiny bit of pleasure that she was experiencing, sure that the rest would be uncomfortable.

She tried some breathing exercises that she had learned from a pocket-sized book that Mama had once given her about staying calm. When her mom had initially given Veda the book, she had laughed at the suggestions in the book and told her mom she was silly, but the techniques in the book had come in handy in many situations. Push your stomach out when you inhale. Exhale through your mouth. She made an effort to do this

while trying to focus on kissing Arthur, which she still enjoyed but from which she felt disconnected. She had to make sure that her muscles would be loose enough to allow Arthur entry, but she had to do it no matter how much it would hurt or felt strange.

He moved his face down to her crotch, and Veda closed her eyes, trying her best to become wet enough to ease whatever would happen. While he licked her, she reached over to the torn box of condoms on the nightstand and held one in her hand, already set to cover Arthur's penis with it and begin the process. He fingered her too, and she imagined that his pointer finger were the jaws-of-life. She had to trust the process. She pulled Arthur's hair and motioned for him to bring his face back to hers but didn't really volunteer to pleasure him in any way except grab his dick for it to be hard enough to take the condom. If she did anything that might distract her from the task at hand, she wouldn't be able to go through with it.

"You're really eager now, aren't you," said Arthur, grinning and pushing Veda's wet hair away from her face. She unrolled the condom over his penis and wiped her hand on the comforter of the bed, trying to get that awful smell of lubricant or spermicide or whatever it was off her fingers. She closed her eyes tightly and hoped that she could transfer whatever tension or clenching from below to her face; at least in her eyes, where it would serve her better. She didn't want to see what was happening, could pretend she was somewhere else entirely.

She felt him slowly push into her, and it hurt like nothing she had ever experienced before. She had known localized pain, like a needle prick in her arm, a drill in her molar, or a period cramp from before she started taking the pill. But this pain was dull and spreading, and she could feel it in her entire middle, radiating to her belly and

through her thighs. She felt raw and torn, as if her virginity were the center of a bullseye, and Arthur had just shot a bullet right through it. It took him a long time to work his way in, even halfway, and Veda was really trying hard to sustain the pain. Her head hurt, her body trembled, she had never felt so horrible.

Veda wanted to cry, but she didn't want to show Arthur that she was upset. She wanted them to get it over with, to just lose it already. She wanted to make it happen, and she didn't want to make Arthur feel bad for stabbing her because it wasn't his fault; it was going to have to happen sometime. She started crying and covered her face with her hands that still smelled like the condom, which probably made the whole experience even worse because of how unnatural and uncomfortable it felt.

"Don't look at my face," she said, trying to disguise the crying and trembling in her voice.

"But you're beautiful, Veda. I want to look at you."

"Please, don't look at me." She took the pillow out from under her head and smothered her face with it. Neither was sure if Arthur had fully completed the act, but he had gone far enough for them to be satisfied that the virginity was gone. She had become almost numb because the pain was just so great. He probably could have pushed more and harder, and she wouldn't even have known.

"I can't do this anymore. You look really upset," he said. He rolled off of her and next to her and held her while she trembled. Veda couldn't stop crying, and she was so ashamed at how scared and injured she felt. He tried to kiss her, but she still covered her face partially with the pillow. Veda curled into herself and moved away from the wet

spot on the bed that they had created from their sweaty fumbling. And Arthur gasped when he saw the blood on the sheets.

She was startled by how much she had bled there, making a small pond of red. She stood up quickly, wrapped a sheet around her, and ran into the bathroom. She sat on the toilet and let the blood drip there. She put her face against the cool tile wall to ease her headache and tried to tell herself that she had accomplished something important. Veda showered again, by herself this time, and both Arthur and Veda dressed to get ready for the city, in silence. She snuck into his mother's bathroom and found a pantyliner to place on her panties so that her pants would not be blood-soaked.

Neither Veda nor Arthur spoke about what had happened. They decided to take a New Jersey Transit bus to the Port Authority terminal, because they always did that so they could claim the sprawling back seat of the bus and make out for the duration of the bus ride.

By the time they got on the bus, someone had claimed the back seat so they had to settle for two seats in the center of the bus. Veda chose the window seat so that she could look out the window while the bus drove down route 46 and then on route 3, which offered a direct view of the Manhattan skyline and fed into the Lincoln Tunnel. She was still in a lot of pain, and she could feel that her pantyliner was soaked. Arthur didn't try to talk to her, but he did hold her hand. He took a music player out of his pants pocket and put one of the headphones into her right ear. He put the other headphone into his left ear. Veda wasn't sure, but she thought that they were listening to the soundtrack from *Rocky*.

The trip in the Manhattan was very direct and only sometimes delayed by tunnel

traffic or from the traffic lights to Weehawken and Hoboken. Veda's favorite part of the trip was the portion of Route 3 that ran through the Meadowlands, with its mix of marshland, landfills, office parks, and recreational facilities. Giants Stadium and the Meadowlands Racetrack rose from the swamps.

Veda's dad worked somewhere in an office building in this wasteland that surrounded New York City, and he had taken her on a pontoon boat tour once, through the ecologically-protected parts, on the Hackensack River and some of its tributaries. More than 260 species of birds lived there, despite how ugly it looked from the highway. She remembered going home after the tour and trying to draw everything that she remembered was beautiful from that trip because it was so easy to forget, driving along that stretch of highway. Since that experience, she couldn't pass through the Meadowlands without feeling like she knew some private secret that she held in her heart, like love. No one else could understand why she loved the smelly wetlands so much, but she knew all its treasures, and she had immortalized them in her drawings.

When they arrived at Port Authority, Arthur had to use the restroom, and Veda used this moment as an opportunity to call Theo. She ducked into a Hudson News store and called the number she had saved, but Theo didn't answer. She left him a voicemail message instead.

"Hi Theo, this is Veda. I met you on the train, and you called me this morning. I just wanted to let you know who I was and that I look forward to hanging out when we get back to school. Talk to you soon."

She quickly closed her phone and caught Arthur looking for her outside of Hudson News. She didn't immediately go to him but instead watched him from the store.

He was her best friend, he was the only person she had ever slept with, he was sexy, and she loved him. The bus terminal was so crowded that she would lose sight of him every few seconds, what with all the people passing him. Veda was in so much pain.

Veda was in the Port Authority bus terminal and no one, not even the person who brought her here, knew where she was. She couldn't understand how it was possible for her to occupy so many places at once.

Smuggling a Boy into Baba's

"I want to live with Baba this summer," Veda announced. She had just completed her junior year of college.

"You're crazy," said Tato. "I give you two weeks before you decide you want to move home, even if the commute is unbearable."

Veda had found a temporary job assisting a photographer in Manhattan, and Baba's house was much closer to the city than her parent's house in the suburbs was. Veda took Tato's challenge as a dare, and she wanted even more than before to live with her Ukrainian grandmother.

"Maybe she's not as annoying as you and I think," said Veda.

"She's just going to make you feel bad about yourself, somehow," Tato said.

Last Christmas, Tato yelled at his mother-in-law at the dinner table, in front of the whole family because Baba told Mama that she was fat. He was mad because everyone had been over-indulging, even Baba, and they had all gained a little bit of weight during the holiday season. How could they resist all the cookies, pierogies, and blintzes that Baba herself had made? Veda was sure a comment like that from Baba would make her want to kill herself, and what frightened her the most about living with Baba was the possibility that it could happen.

“I am willing to make that sacrifice to be closer to my friends and the city,” said Veda, even though she wasn’t sure that was completely true.

All of Veda’s closest friends were going to be living in or right outside of New York City. Madsy would be taking summer classes, and Veda just wanted to be close to her best friend. Theo got an internship in Manhattan too, before pharmacy school started in the fall. However, Veda and Theo were not in a relationship. When he graduated, she gave him a card, but he made it clear to her that they could not be together. She just kept hoping he would eventually change his mind.

Veda would live where Mama grew up, in a row house near Journal Square in Jersey City, NJ, just a block away from the PATH, a train that ran under the Hudson River and connected to New York City. She was curious about living in her mom’s childhood home and looked forward to the opportunity to imagine her mother’s life, as it was before Veda existed, before Mama ever met Tato. Veda wondered if the experience would give her any more insight into her mother’s mind.

Before her job began, and she actually moved into the room, Veda repainted the walls a pale blue because she couldn’t stand the previous paint: a green that looked like the inside of the stale Andes mint candies Baba left out in a glass tray in her living room. Baba was always offering Veda those mint candies, and Veda couldn’t explain to Baba that chocolate was bad for her skin and would make her gain weight.

Veda covered the bed with a bright plaid comforter, and hung up some stuff she had found in the neighborhood: a string of colorful “good luck” elephants that she bought from an Indian gift shop and a mess of take-out menus that she took from local restaurants, just to remind her what she could eat when she didn’t feel like cooking in

Baba's small and mostly unusable kitchen. The oven didn't function, and it was filled with old papers, like a filing box. The stove, which Baba mostly used to boil water and heat borscht, was covered with little ceramic trinkets and a picture frame with the paper photo of a child that no one knew. Why didn't Baba have a picture of Veda there?

She spent a whole afternoon moving cases of soda that Baba had stashed and brought them to the basement. Veda didn't need the sugar-filled bombs, which would just remind her of everything that she had given up. Away from home, without Mama around to monitor her diet, Veda was eating a lot less and definitely not drinking soda. Salad for dinner, diet soda to ease her hunger pains. Being skinny and looking super hot was Veda's revenge against Theo for breaking up with her when he graduated; if she happened to run into him, she hoped that he would feel horrible for giving her up.

"Don't carry so many cases by yourself!" Shouted Baba, as Veda maneuvered them down the hall to the basement door. "You're going to give yourself a hernia!"

"Stop, Baba. I'm all right."

"Please, please don't carry the soda by yourself. You are really going to hurt yourself."

"I'm fine. I'm a strong, young woman," said Veda, as she felt a phantom jab of pain in her abdomen. She wondered for a moment if her health was in danger from carrying those boxes. Was something bad going to happen? The pain jabbed again, and she shook her head. The truth was that Veda never got along with Baba either. In the past, Veda had avoided spending time with Baba because she was convinced that Baba was the genetic predecessor to her own issues with anxiety and the reason she had developed so many irrational fears as a child.

Veda wondered if living with Baba would incite daily panic attacks, or if she had matured enough to rationalize all of Baba's behaviors and beliefs. At the same time, Veda realized, Baba was probably the reason that Veda was so talented at drawing; Baba herself was an amateur artist, and she spent a lot of time with colored pencils, crayons, and paper. Baba liked to draw pictures of the flowers and also of Ukrainian villages, with horses and wooden fences and thatched roof houses. All her pictures lacked perspective, which made them childlike but brilliant all the same, like the artists that made famous religious icons.

On Veda's first day of work, the commute was even more convenient than she had expected. She only had to walk one block to get to the PATH station, and a train was waiting. However, Veda mistrusted convenience. It would take her a while to believe that the commute was actually as good as it seemed. At school, Veda and Theo's relationship had been one of convenience, which meant they only had to walk a block or so to one another's dorm, on nights when they didn't have too much to read and could watch rented films and drink cheap wine until they got drunk enough to not mind making out on the itchy, blue, university-issued couches.

The smell in the PATH stations was stale and pungent, but Veda was not offended by it. She loved the quiet on the morning train to 33rd Street, even though it was jam-packed with people. The only sound was the rustling of newspaper pages, and everyone either sat or stood very still, holding onto a bar, swaying with the motion of the train. She didn't wear makeup in the morning. She was sure that a thin layer of sweat would accumulate on her face by the time she got to Edgar's studio. But she brought makeup for later, for when the summer day cooled down and she wanted to look pretty.

Edgar's studio was a block away from Union Square, on the fourth floor of a building that had a Belgian waffle shop on street level. When Edgar opened the windows to get fresh air, the scent of sizzling waffle batter filled the mostly empty, high-ceilinged studio and made Veda drunk on sugar smell. She was going to try to go without lunch, to save money, she told herself. Really, she just wanted to lose more weight, but she wasn't sure if she could stand the fact that the studio was located over a waffle shop.

Edgar was known for fashion and food photography for magazines and ad promos. The first project that Veda assisted was a photo shoot for a fashion magazine, and a tall, willowy model arrived for a shoot just a few minutes after she did. A stylist, with a trunk full of clothes, and a makeup artist, with her case of makeup, came after the model. Veda was going to learn as she went, understanding how Edgar worked and which lenses and tools he would need as he did the shoot. Veda would have to become used to his style and intuitively know what he needed.

Veda thought the model was beautiful as she emerged from makeup and a change of clothes and arranged herself on a prop bench in front of the white backdrop. She wondered if the model had relationship troubles, if men treated her badly, and if they had ever broken up with her. She was tempted to try to start a conversation with the model after the shoot but thought better of it.

"Can you hold this light reflector up for me?" Asked Edgar. "The natural light is gorgeous."

The light reflector shook when Veda held it because she was feeling weak and hungry, but she did her best to follow Edgar's directions. She was grateful to work for him, even though she didn't love photography. She learned a lot about light and

perspective just by watching him take pictures. The modeling jobs were most lucrative for Edgar, but he promised to take Veda outside, where they would shoot action shots in the park. She always hoped she would run into Theo on the streets, but she never did see him.

Every day working for Edgar was pretty much the same. Most days after work, Veda would meet Madsy, and they would flirt with men they would meet in restaurants and bars, or they would windowshop in quirky boutiques, trying on clothes they couldn't afford. On days when she came home after work, because Madsy had class, Veda would pick up Chinese or Thai take-out, which she shared with Baba, who never really left the house. Baba had neither a car nor a driver's license, and she had trouble walking up and down stairs.

She felt really sorry for Baba, most of the time. Veda wouldn't have been able to stand staying in the house all day long, especially since Baba only had the first floor; she rented the second floor to three Polish ladies. She had a backyard the size of a prison cell with a fence that looked like prison bars, and what backyard she had was in the shadow of a twelve-story building. Baba grew poppies there, to remind her of the ones that grew in Ukraine; she would pick the flowers, arrange them in a vase and draw pictures of them. If Baba didn't go outside to pick flowers, the only way that she knew about the weather was from CNN.

If Veda came home wearing a sleeveless dress or a short-sleeved shirt, Baba would tell her she was crazy because it was too cold outside to wear such things. Meanwhile, Veda would be sweating and shaking her head.

Baba thought the Chinese food that Veda brought home was best she ever had. The Chinese and Thai food, which weren't really authentic because Veda always asked them to steam the vegetables and hold the sauce to save calories, was really the only thing she ate at Baba's house besides cereal; Veda didn't really want Baba's highly caloric blintzes or fried pierogies. She began to associate eating in Baba's Ukrainian kitchen with the smell of Chinese brown sauce and sticky white rice.

While they ate dinner together, Baba always wanted Veda to describe the places where Veda bought the food or the places she had visited that day in Manhattan. Or Baba would want Veda to tell her about her friends or about her "boyfriend", even though Veda didn't have a boyfriend, hadn't really had a boyfriend since Arthur. But Baba was convinced that Veda had a boyfriend, after she found a picture of Veda and Theo that Veda had left on the nightstand in her bedroom.

It was too hard for Veda to explain, especially in Ukrainian and loudly too, so most of the time Veda would make up stories that were easy to relate in Ukrainian. She thought that people from Baba's generation had one boyfriend, married that boyfriend, and spent the rest of their lives with the boyfriend. Veda wasn't sure if Baba realized that things were different now. A lot of times Baba asked Veda complicated questions that Veda wasn't sure how to answer so she would say "yes" or "no" or she allowed Baba to lead her an answer, which was usually not correct.

One rainy evening, while Veda and Baba were eating steamed chicken and broccoli from the Chinese take-out, Theo called Veda for the first time since she had moved to New Jersey for the summer. Veda excused herself, and Baba gave her a skeptical look. Veda knew that Baba didn't like when Veda talked on the cell phone

when it was raining because she thought that Veda would get struck by lightning. She went to her bedroom and shut the door so that she could have some privacy.

“I’m going to be in Manhattan on Friday night, and I want to know if you would come to an open bar with me and some of my friends,” said Theo.

“Get off the phone!” Baba screamed. She started to bang her fists on Veda’s door. “The lightning will hit you!”

“Hey Theo, can you hold on? My grandma is banging on the door.”

Veda opened the door and calmly tried to tell Baba that it was going to be okay and that she wasn’t going to get off the phone.

“What’s going on? Why is your grandma upset?” Asked Theo.

“She thinks I’m going to get hit by lightning,” said Veda, laughing. She felt a little badly about shutting the door on Baba, but Baba was being ridiculous. “Anyway, why are you calling? I thought we weren’t going to stay in touch.”

Veda’s phone made a beeping sound that indicated that her mother was trying to reach her.

“Hey, can you hold on for a second? I have another call,” said Veda. “Hello? Mom? I’m on the other line. I can’t talk.”

“Baba called me from the house and said that you are being mean to her and that you won’t listen to her.” Said Mama.

“Baba thinks I’m going to get struck by lightning. Tell her that she’s being ridiculous. I’m trying to carry on an important phone conversation here.” Veda hung up on her mom and returned to Theo’s phone call.

“Hi, sorry about that.” Said Veda. “So why are you calling me? I thought we were over.”

“I miss you, Veda. I’m having second thoughts about my decision. I just can’t stop thinking about you,” said Theo. “I keep asking myself: what is the harm in seeing you?”

“Well, I miss you too, but you made it very clear to me that we were over. I don’t want to go through all that again because of a whim that you have,” said Veda, trying to prevent herself from agreeing to his plan too quickly. She knew that she would concede eventually, but she didn’t want to seem too eager.

“Won’t you give me a chance? It’s just a night at a bar. I’m not asking you to marry me,” said Theo.

“Okay, Friday, you said? If it sucks, I’m leaving,” said Veda. “And you better not get shitfaced.”

“Can’t wait to see you, beautiful.”

“I’m off the phone, Baba.” Veda shouted through the kitchen so that Baba could hear her from the living room, even though she probably didn’t hear her.

On the Friday that Veda was supposed to meet Theo, she could not focus on anything. She was so nervous about seeing Theo that she wasn’t even distracted by the smell of Belgian waffles. She wasn’t sure that she had made the right decision meeting him. Why did she always give in to him so easily? She never let him work for anything! She was just such a sucker for his sexiness that she would probably follow him off a cliff if he asked her, just because she’d be so mesmerized by him that she wouldn’t know what

was happening. Veda definitely asked for the bad treatment from him, but she just couldn't help it. She was addicted to Theo.

The PATH station, at least, was comforting. Each time she rode the train, she was less disgusted and more reassured by it. The smell was familiar, even though it was unappealing. She grew so accustomed to it that she feared for herself. One day, she thought, she would come back to the PATH station, and it would remind her of her favorite summer. The smell of rotting garbage would break her heart the same way that Theo had. She was so aware of that fact, but she loved it all just the same.

Edgar was taking Veda to a restaurant shoot, but her stomach hurt so badly from nervousness that she wasn't even tempted by the decadent cakes that he was photographing. She kept checking her skin in the restaurant's mirrored walls to see if she looked okay and if her butt was looking good in her black pants. She wanted Theo to be completely blown away by her when he saw her later, but she also thought it was unfair for him to put so much pressure on her. She knew he either wanted to see her because he wanted sex or decided to test the waters, but the possibility of something greater, of him actually wanting to be her boyfriend, always made her curious.

In the evening, Veda came home with Pad Thai for Baba, who in turn asked Veda about the Puerto Ricans that made the food. Of course, Puerto Ricans had not made the Thai food. Veda told Baba they were nice, because she wasn't sure how to explain anything further. After Veda showered and put on a new summer dress that she had purchased specifically for the occasion, Veda ate the take-out and sat in the living room with Baba, while Baba watched CNN. She had left most of the Pad Thai on her plate,

which she rested on an ottoman covered with a Ukrainian cloth embroidered with red and black thread.

“You go out?” She asked.

“Yes, but not until nine.” Answered Veda.

“Where you go so late?” Baba asked, becoming angry.

“We are going to a bar, Baba,” Veda said.

“What kind of girl goes out at nine? What you thinking?”

Veda left the room and called Mama; she asked her mom to tell Baba to calm down. Baba had a concerned look on her face, and she was no longer yelling at CNN and their coverage of the black man who was running for president. Moments later, the phone rang, but it rang many times because Baba had to stand up, walk down the long hallway and settle in to an overstuffed armchair covered with two different types of Ukrainian embroidered towels before she could answer the phone with buttons the size of quarters. Veda stood next to the phone while her mother talked to Baba. She could hear the entire conversation because the receiver volume was set to such a high volume.

Once Veda’s mom finished calming Baba down, Baba took her blood pressure monitor and began to measure her blood pressure. She kept a notebook next to the monitor so that she could record her blood pressure numbers every day. Veda couldn’t stand to watch her perform this obsessive task.

The monitor beeped loudly as if Baba were in danger, and she waved at Veda to come over to her and look at the screen. The systolic had no reading, and Veda got scared for a moment, thinking that maybe she had provoked something to make Baba ill, but the two women tried it again, realizing it was only the machine’s error. Baba

recorded the number, 140 over 72, sat down on a wooden chair next to Baba, and rolled the white beads of Baba's rosary between her fingers.

Baba noticed that Veda was playing with her rosary and told Veda she had jewelry that she could wear to the bar, if Veda wanted to borrow something of hers. Baba showed Veda a handful of gold-plated chains; they were Baba's treasures, but Veda thought they were of such poor quality. One ring looked like the kind of thing you get from those coin prize machines at the bowling alley. Another necklace looked like it could have been part of a chain pull for a ceiling fan.

Baba started to tell Veda a story about a time that she was in a labor camp during World War II, but Veda could only understand bits and pieces of the story. Veda could understand Ukrainian pretty well, but Baba's language was unique; it was a language pieced together with words from German, Ukrainian, and English, sometimes even Polish. The Polish came from the women who lived upstairs, three Polish tenants and also Baba's other Polish friends. The German came from World War II and the period she lived in Germany with Dido, Veda's deceased grandfather.

From what Veda understood of the story Baba told her about him, Dido found Baba once they were liberated, and decided since they were both alone and both Ukrainian, they should get together. Veda laughed at that story because she couldn't believe the ease with which their relationship had begun.

The only other things Veda got from Baba's stories were the terror of the bombs falling on a church in her village, a woman named *Hrooba*, or fat, *Ashka*, who stole their food rations and gave them to her French lover, and a girl who stole tomatoes from the small chef, who she beat up because she was bigger than him. Also, that Baba had a

notebook, which she burned because she was afraid the Russians would find it and use it as evidence against her. Veda wondered then if she should burn naked pictures she once took for her Arthur and imagined what Theo would think if he ever found them.

Veda's interpretation of Baba's experience in war-time Europe was one that was both comical and horrifying, and who knows how much of what she told Veda was correctly interpreted in her head. Baba could have kept talking about her experiences, and she wanted to keep listening, but it was exhausting to listen to someone speak a language Veda only partly understood, and it was time to go meet Theo at the 23rd Street PATH station.

When Veda told Baba that she had to leave, she could tell that Baba was worried again. For the last time, she tried to convince Veda to stay. Baba would share some cookies with her, the chocolate dipped ones from the bakery, and they could watch CNN together, or she could tell Veda more about her experiences.

Veda had to wear a sweater over her sleeveless sundress in order to get out of the house without Baba commenting on the inappropriate nature of her dress, but she was also kind of glad that she had an excuse to wear it because she was self-conscious of her bare shoulders and wasn't sure who would be riding the PATH at this time. A girl by herself wearing a tight dress and exposing a lot of skin would attract attention. Also, Veda hoped she could use it as a funny story to tell Theo at the bar and also as an excuse to wear the sweater if she felt uncomfortable around his friends.

"Please go to sleep, Baba," said Veda. "I don't know what time I'm going to be home."

When she met Theo above ground, on 23rd and 6th, he was wearing dark jeans and a grey cotton t-shirt with a black pattern on the front. He hadn't shaved so his face was dark around his mouth, and his dark hair was just messy enough. She was just as attracted to him as she had been the last time she saw him. Veda immediately wanted to grab him and give him a hug and a kiss, but she didn't want to seem too eager, especially in the company of Theo's friends, so she casually said "hey", and he introduced her to them.

"Veda, you look super hot," he said. He smiled and put his arm over her shoulder, pulling her toward him proudly as he introduced Veda to his friends.

She thought about how hungry she had been lately, so hungry that she could barely concentrate on anything else. Food occupied her every thought. She was even asking Edgar if they could do more food and restaurant photography, just so that she could be around food. She was happy that Theo thought she looked smoking hot, and it seemed worth it to her, but she didn't like feeling so obsessed with food. What if she started eating more again? Would it make him think differently?

The four of them walked about six blocks to the bar, and the whole time Theo held Veda's hand, something that he had never really done before. She was surprised by his gesture. He was against all displays of public affection, and Veda even remembered that one time he hugged her quickly on the quad. She was so shocked that she had run home and told her roommates about it because she couldn't believe that he would do such a thing in public.

Perhaps because Veda was so taken aback by Theo's strange behavior, she caught herself flirting with his old high school buddy, Eric, as they walked. Veda was just

asking him about where he attended school and what he did but she noticed that the tone of her voice was more playful than inquisitive. Veda wondered if Theo noticed, and if he was jealous.

But Theo was holding Veda's hand and looking straight ahead, weaving her through the people who were walking too slowly. The air was humid, and Veda felt sexy; she decided that it was too warm for the sweater and removed it, revealing her bare shoulders, which hadn't really had a chance to get a tan, since she had been in Edgar's studio mostly.

They waited to cross at a busy intersection, and Eric and Sam argued about the location of the alley where Sam felt up a waitress he met at a sports bar. Veda felt privileged to listen to insider young guy information, but Theo interrupted her thoughts. He moved his lips close to her ear.

"How about I come home with you," he whispered. "I'll come back to your grandma's house with you."

Veda knew that it was a bad idea, but she was shocked that he wanted to spend the night with her, like old times. Did this mean that he wanted to get back with her? Of course, she wanted him to come home with her, and she thought it would be exciting to sneak him into the house. She couldn't explain to anyone the way she lived in Baba's house, and she wanted so badly for someone to witness it, to make it more real for her. His breath was hot on her ear, and she couldn't wait for more, for the space they would share in a twin size bed, even smaller than the bed in her dorm room at school.

"Let's see how the night goes," said Veda. "Don't get your hopes up."

When they got to the bar, Cantina Loca, Veda remembered that she had been there before, with Madsy, some other time. Cantina Loca was one of those places that they would never visit with serious intentions; this bar was the type of place they visited because they could dress up like sluts and pretend to be the kind of girls that they were not. Veda and Madsy must have been drunk that other time; she recalled dancing on the bar with her friend. She wanted to share this story with Theo and his friends but thought that they probably wouldn't understand, being that they were guys.

Veda knew that the guys liked the fact that the flat screen televisions behind the bar broadcasted sports games that had already aired that day, through the miracle of satellite television. On television, it was still daylight, even though the bar was dark and the night outside even darker. She knew that they liked how the female bartenders wore little red bikini tops, as if they were tanning at a Mexican resort. Veda scolded herself when she thought it was stupid that Theo liked the tacos they gave out for free after midnight. She told herself that it was wrong to be a snob, to criticize someone because they liked rancid corn taco shells with greasy meat and too much cheese.

"I wish I lived in Mexico so that I could eat these every day," said Theo.

"I wonder what Baba would think," said Veda. The inauthentic Mexican paraphernalia nailed to the wall behind the bar made Veda miss Baba and her authentic Ukrainian things, which fell off desks and dressers sometimes, if Baba happened to bump into them. "She's been into Chinese and Thai lately."

"Cool, want a tequila shot?" asked Theo.

"I'll have a beer, please."

Theo smiled and ordered a beer too, which he drank quickly. Veda was excited to take advantage of the open bar and also to work up enough of a buzz to be silly with Theo. However, she didn't want to get so drunk that she wouldn't want to have sex with him later, feel sick or pass out, or worse, be so drunk that she couldn't remember how she was going to smuggle Theo into Baba's house. Veda thought Theo might want to do the same, to remain coherent for the experience, especially since it would take skill to sneak into Baba's, but he started drinking quickly and shamelessly.

"You will love it at my grandma's house," said Veda, in an effort to get him to slow down. "She has such a strange and interesting array of artwork on the walls, all of which she made herself."

"I can't wait to break the rules with you, sexy girl," said Theo.

Theo's friends sat by the television most of the time, watching the sports channel. Veda could tell they were looking at the female bartenders too, especially the ones who were asked to dance on the bar. They looked longingly at the young women who were getting tequila poured into their mouths, straight from the bottle. By the time Theo finished his sixth beer, Veda was only halfway through her second, which gave her enough of a buzz to laugh when he pulled her over to a secluded lounge sofa, even though she wanted to dance.

"I love you, Veda," said Theo, pulling Veda's hair away from her sticky neck so that he could kiss her skin. "You mean the world to me."

"Don't say things like that when you're drunk," said Veda.

He had never said that before. She wanted to believe him, but she couldn't let herself believe him. She had to pretend that he hadn't said those words to her. It was so

tempting to take those words and convince herself that they were true, especially since he was saying them. And it made Veda look forward to spending the night with him more, hearing him say those things and wondering if they were really true.

“I’ve been afraid to tell you, because I wasn’t sure how you felt about me.” Said Theo, as he spilled beer on Veda’s knee and tried to kiss her hand.

“Then why the hell did you break up with me?” Veda asked.

“I just wasn’t sure what I wanted,” said Theo. “Don’t take everything so personally.”

She should have been looking forward to sleeping with Theo again, especially since she was so physically attracted to him. However, Veda wasn’t even sure if she wanted to have sex with Theo, after he started getting a little drunk and telling her things she wasn’t sure he really meant. The irony was that Veda wanted to have sex with him more before he drunkenly told her that he had loved her.

She had imagined it differently; she was supposed to be overjoyed by his words. But now that Theo had actually said it, with beer on his breath, Veda was turned off. Veda really didn’t want to sleep with someone who would sweat beer on her throughout the whole night and possibly make so much noise and be so belligerently drunk upon entering Baba’s house that they would get caught. And when they got caught, Veda knew that Theo would blame it on her because it was her grandma’s house.

Veda was disappointed with Theo but more disappointed with herself for having expectations of a guy who didn’t have the greatest track record.

“Why don’t we go dance?” asked Theo. Veda wanted to dance, but she didn’t want to look like a fool dancing with a drunk guy.

“No, let’s just stay here.” Said Veda, who was no longer in the mood to dance. But he pulled her up from the couch and onto the dirty, wet dance floor, with the other revelers. In the sweat of the colored hot lights, he rubbed his crotch against her butt on the dance floor, and Veda was annoyed because her dress was becoming sweaty and beer-stained. She was beginning to look like a mess. Moving her hips back and forth on the dance floor, trying not to feel nauseous from the heat, Veda couldn’t decide if she should drink more to catch up with Theo or if she should abandon the whole plan and go home alone.

Finally, Eric came over and told Theo he should probably take a break. Veda thought that Eric knew she didn’t really find Theo’s drunkenness attractive or sexy. Eric wasn’t drinking that much because he had to drive Sam home, and sober people always had more insight into the way other sober people feel. Veda smiled at Eric and nodded her head. Eric took the Theo’s glass, still full of beer.

“You need to cool it,” said Eric. “I’m sure Veda doesn’t want to take care of you tonight.”

“I don’t mind,” Veda said.

But she was never sure why she was always telling Theo that she didn’t mind the way he treated her. Theo was just so good at rejecting Veda, acting mysteriously, and playing hard to get that she lived for any moment when he would give her attention and affection. She would put up with almost anything for a moment like that, because it was such a rush to finally earn his approval. Veda wondered if there would ever be a day when she would be sick of constantly seeking his attention. She almost hoped that the day would soon come.

Eric and Sam decided that they had enough of the bar for the evening. It was after two in the morning, and neither of them had any prospects for one-night stands, alleyway hookups, or even phone number exchanges. It was not a good night for either of them, but Theo had Veda, and they were going home together.

“Let’s call it a night and head to the PATH station before it gets too late,” Veda suggested.

Later, the trains came more infrequently, and the people who rode them became more and more obnoxious. When they got to the station, a train had just pulled up. It would sit there and wait for passengers for about ten minutes, but they had made practically perfect timing. The doors weren’t open yet so they had to stand outside the train. The PATH station was hot, and no air was really circulating. Theo had to sit down against a freestanding advertisement because he was so dizzy.

“I feel nauseous,” said Theo. Veda wasn’t feeling well either, but she was more sober than he was so she squatted down, despite her dress, and rubbed his lower back to try to make him feel better. She hoped Theo would remember her patience and kindness later so that he would be nicer to her too. She hoped he would realize what a great girlfriend she would make.

“Stop, it’s too hot,” he said. When the train doors opened, Theo refused to get on the train. “I feel like I’m going to throw up.”

He got up and started pacing. Veda just watched him. A lot of other people waiting for the train noticed Veda’s predicament; she was playing caretaker to someone who probably should have been taking care of her. A few attractive guys looked at Veda

and shook their heads at Theo. She could tell they felt sorry for her and probably wished that they were the ones taking her home.

Veda would nod at them too, as if to acknowledge her interest but to emphasize that she had to remain true to Theo, who she couldn't leave alone at this point. Sure, Theo was a lousy on-again, off-again thing, but they were friends to a certain extent. At least, she thought they could be friends. He wasn't just a random guy, she told herself; if something happened to him, Sam and Eric would be mad at her. They assumed that Veda was the friend that was taking over, not just the girl who was taking him home.

The conductor announced the train's departure, but Theo wouldn't come on the train, even after Veda tried to enter the train and wait for him from within the compartment. Veda felt a little sorry for him, but she really wished he could just suck it up and get on the train because otherwise they would have to wait another half hour in the hot PATH station, making the situation worse for both of them.

Instead, he wandered off to the parallel track and vomited between the cars of an out-of-service train. Veda had to get the PATH and stand near him to make sure he was okay. The guys on the train started calling after her as the doors of the departing train closed, and she was left on the track with just the vomiting guy, missing her opportunity to go back to Baba's house alone. Theo was so intent on puking that he hadn't even realized that the train was pulling away. When he was finally done, he straightened himself.

"I feel better," said Theo, covering his mouth with his hand. "Do you have any napkins?"

“No, we missed our train,” Veda said. Now, she was getting really mad and debated leaving him in the station. This was not worth his friendship, she thought. Veda’s parents never really liked Theo anyway. They said it was because he wasn’t Ukrainian, but Veda didn’t believe it. It was because he was a shithead.

“Where am I supposed to find you a fucking napkin?”

“Why are you mad?” asked Theo. “I feel really sick.”

She would want someone else to help her if she was sick, she thought. So she tried to shed her selfishness and be Theo’s friend. To their knowledge, the PATH station had no public restrooms, and the guys at the newsstand didn’t have any napkins. They had to resurface to ground-level to find a public restroom. No businesses in the neighborhood had a public restroom that they could use; all the bathrooms were locked and either accessible only to employees or by key for customers.

They found a street vendor who sold hot dogs and asked him for a bunch of napkins. Luckily, he gave Theo a small stack of napkins without any questions or comments. Theo wiped the vomit from his face and put some of the unused napkins in his pocket, which signaled to Veda that he would probably throw up again.

They went back underground and waited for the train. At this point, Veda didn’t want to talk to Theo at all, so she sat on the ground and read the timetables. She would stick with him, but she wasn’t going to be nice to him. The strange and the belligerently drunk were starting to gather in the station. Girls with wobbly ankles from their drunkenness and heels grabbed onto the ticket turnstiles and boyfriends for support. Men with their shirts half unbuttoned were already reminiscing loudly about the night they just had.

When the train finally arrived, Veda literally pulled Theo into a car. She was not going to miss another train. Veda had a headache and, though she was not drunk, she felt dehydrated and her head was foggy. They both had to stand, holding on to the handrails by the door. The train was very crowded, and Veda felt sick too, mostly because she was so tired and hot. Theo kept looking at the floor, but Veda didn't want to touch him, and she was sick of asking him if he was okay.

When the train started to move, Theo lasted for about five minutes then pushed his way to the back of the car, by the sliding door that connected the cars. Veda knew what was happening, but she didn't feel like turning around to check on him. She just knew he was going to throw up, and she didn't even care anymore. He had the napkins in his pocket, he was an adult, he could deal with it himself. Veda didn't even care if he fell between the cars because at least she was on the train, headed back to Journal Square to Baba's house. Veda would rather everyone think she was a girl coming home alone on this train than someone associated with the mess that Theo had made of himself. When he finally came back to stand next to Veda, he smelled like vomit.

"I didn't even drink that much," he mumbled.

"Whatever," said Veda.

They finally got to the outside of Baba's house, and Veda quietly unlocked the door and told Theo to wait for her while she made sure that Baba was sleeping. The main hallway was dark, and Baba wasn't in the living room, watching CNN or praying with her rosary. Veda told Theo that she was going to walk ahead, down the hall, and that he should do the same, as quietly as he could. She doubted his ability to follow directions at

this point. He didn't get to see much of Baba's house because it was dark, and she rushed him to her room, which was at the end of a long hallway and off of the kitchen.

When they were finally both safe in her bedroom, Veda realized that she was a little sad that Theo didn't get a chance to see the drawings on the walls and the embroidery throughout the house and the display of *pysanky*, or elaborately-dyed Ukrainian Easter eggs in the display case in her dining room. He probably would never get to see them, to understand what she was talking about when she talked about Baba. Veda's bedroom was so distinctly different from the other rooms in the house. In the morning, she would have to quickly sneak Theo out of the house, and he wouldn't really get to see anything then either.

"Let me just wake up Baba and tell her that I made it home safely," said Veda. "I don't want her checking on me in the middle of the night and finding you here."

Veda went into Baba's bedroom, with the bed that was so high she needed a stepstool to climb into it, and gently shook Baba's shoulder.

"I'm home safe," said Veda. Baba opened her eyes a little, confused. The thick comforter engulfed her small, frail body, and she looked startled.

"Did you have fun?" asked Baba.

"*Tak*," said Veda, because it was late. Veda wouldn't even know how to begin to explain the whole story in Ukrainian.

When Veda returned to her bedroom, Theo was already asleep in her bed, taking up most of the space. She couldn't believe she had gone through everything and had been so nice to him only to find him sleeping.

She wanted an explanation, at least, something to confirm or refute his proclamation of love for her. Over and over, Theo had this horrible influence over her decisions. She felt powerless yet still found him attractive, even as he slept drunkenly on her bed, sweating beer on her nice comforter. She washed her face, changed into her pajamas, and tried her best to somehow fit into Theo's arms.

A Breakthrough, Bleeding

Veda snuck Theo into her bedroom while Mama and Tato were watching a movie and drinking wine in the family room. He was carrying his pharmacy textbook because he had just come from a late class. She quietly opened the front door for him, and they matched their footsteps as they climbed up the stairs, creating the illusion that only one person was walking.

Veda couldn't wait for the time when she could have her own apartment, when she would no longer have to sneak her boyfriends around in order to have fun. But she also wondered if that would make the sex less exciting.

Veda could tell that Theo was nervous, and she liked the feeling of power she had over him. Calming him with her kisses, covering his mouth with her own whenever he tried to protest, was her way of caring for him. Even though she had gotten him this far, Theo still expressed his doubts about staying.

"What if they find us?" Asked Theo. "I'm never going to be allowed to see you again. Do you think sneaking around is worth that risk?"

Veda was so attracted to him that she didn't care if anyone found them. She couldn't think beyond the present moment, and she pushed him down on her bed and started kissing his neck until he gave in and began to take off her shirt. She loved to wrap

herself around him as tightly as she could, and sometimes she didn't even notice how tightly she was holding until Theo commented on it.

But he didn't seem to mind too much now, which Veda thought was an improvement from months before. She wished so hard that maybe Theo would now be as serious about her as he was about his schoolwork, which seemed to occupy every one of his thoughts. She hoped that his homework wouldn't always be his excuse to postpone plans with her and, though she respected his work ethic, she thought he used school as a way to prevent himself from becoming close to her.

Even though they hadn't used condoms in months, Theo still tried to get Veda to agree to let him use one. She had some in the nightstand by her bed, from before, when they were playing it safe. Every time they had sex without a condom, Veda felt like she had won some kind of battle with Theo, who was extremely worried about impregnating Veda, even though she took the Pill.

When they were done, Veda curled her body into a ball and pressed her back into Theo. She was so satisfied afterward that she didn't want to move.

"You have to get up," said Theo. "You have to pee after penetration. You know that. I don't want you to get a bladder infection."

"No," she mumbled, because she was already half asleep.

"Go, you have to go. Get up. Don't be lazy."

"Stop, leave me alone," said Veda. "I can take care of myself."

Her alarm clock read four eleven when Theo decided that he didn't really want to follow through with Veda's plan and stay the night.

“I don’t know why you don’t ever listen to me,” said Theo. “I’m just looking out for your health.”

“Fine, just leave,” she had said, not really thinking that he would. He didn’t even ask her to accompany him, which made her feel unneeded. That was part of the plan, for when he was in her house, with her parents near, he had to put complete trust in her. In his rush to leave her house, he forgot his pharmacy textbook. Even if Veda wanted to be upset, but she couldn’t; she was so exhausted that she fell asleep, clutching the textbook in her arms.

The sound of her parents getting ready for their celebratory wedding anniversary breakfast at the Tick Tock Diner woke her up. Mama was notorious for slamming doors and dropping her hairdryer, waking everyone in the house like a resident rooster. Veda woke to Mama’s noises and found that she was spooning a six hundred and forty five page hardback with a cracked spine. She laughed to herself and thought that sleeping next to Theo’s book was the second-best thing to sleeping next to him; he was notorious for doing things by the book anyway.

What was she supposed to do now? Veda pushed the book off the edge of her bed because she couldn’t stand to look at the emotionless illustrations of human innards and the photographs of people’s unattractive symptoms. She hoped that using the bathroom would help her go back to sleep and wished Theo was still in her room so she could say, look, I did it. I did what you freaking wanted.

When she looked down at the fabric stretched around her feet, she was alarmed by a dark streak of blood on the cotton crotch. She bent over and touched the stain, still wet,

with her fingers; the spot left thick, red mucus on her hand. But she already had her period, only about a week ago.

Veda's first suspicion was that the Pill, which she took every morning, had done something to her body. She was constantly skeptical of her birth control, even though she was glad it allowed her to have sex with Theo without condoms, which she thought smelled disgusting. She thought it freed her, but in reality she never felt free; she tried not to think about all the things the hormones might be doing to her body, even though her gynecologist, Dr. Girard, assured her that they were completely safe. She was starting to blame everything on the Pill: headaches, backaches, stomachaches, everything. Veda was also always terrified that she would gain weight, but Dr. Girard prescribed "low-dose" pills to prevent the bloating. And she was never convinced that something as small as a watch battery could actually protect her from pregnancy.

She inserted a tampon to stop the bleeding and assessed her birth control pack. She was so used to taking the Pill every morning that sometimes she wondered if she had forgotten to take it. The first row and the first two spaces of the second row were empty, and this morning's Pill was Tuesday, today, according to her serene landscape calendar, a promotional item for anti-anxiety medication that Theo had swiped for Veda at a pharmaceutical conference.

Veda didn't feel like being alone and wondered if she could ask her parents if she could accompany them on their anniversary breakfast at the Tick Tock Diner. She was actually really hungry and would like to eat a big breakfast. Veda dressed herself, applied makeup, and gathered her things and the textbook, in case Theo made time for her later in the day.

While waiting for Mama to finish her shower so she could ask her, Veda opened Theo's textbook to its index and found birth control pills. A small section of the chapter on reproductive medicine explained how the Pill worked. She ran her finger over the glossy page. Breakthrough bleeding, or bleeding that occurs while a woman is taking active birth control pills, was normal, according to the book. She turned the page to find two sets of illustrations. One showed the sperm as it met an egg in a woman not on the Pill. The other showed the sperm swimming idly inside a woman whose eggs have not been released.

Veda was impressed by the detail in the illustrations and wondered how a person could become an artist for a medical textbook. She had never tried her hand at such realistic drawings and wondered if she would be any good at them. Veda liked the first illustration better, in theory. She found something very appealing about the drama of the sperm finding the egg. But she was disgusted by the way it dug into the egg, the way it implanted itself and swelled. She really did not want anything so violent and invasive occurring in her own body, and she was glad to know that Theo's sperm found no purpose, as long as she was on the Pill. Veda closed the textbook and allowed her imagination to wander.

Still, she waited to ask her parents. She took a sketchbook and some pastels and began to sketch the scene on her calendar, with its babbling brook in a grove of blooming cherry blossoms. She wanted to distract herself from the uncomfortable, wet feeling between her legs and the cramps that were burning and twisting her lower abdomen, which she hoped were just from hunger. She tried to start with the blossoms, with their

pinks and magentas. But she couldn't put down the red pastel and began to trace the movement of the stream in red, even though the stream in the calendar was mossy green.

She was about to begin another color when Mama knocked on her bedroom door and opened it a crack. Veda's mom crouched down next to her daughter to see what she was drawing. Mama licked her thumb and cleaned red smudges off Veda's cheeks. The red pastel had gotten on her face and elbows, and Veda hadn't yet noticed. Veda wished her mom a happy anniversary and threw her arms around her neck.

"I don't feel well, Mama."

"What's the matter?"

"I am bleeding really heavily, but it's not yet time for my period."

"I told you not to take that damn pill. It's not like you're engaged or even have a steady boyfriend. Why do you need to mess with your body?"

Veda was not prepared for her mother's reaction and could barely form a response.

"I was just wondering if you had any idea what might be causing it. Do you?"

"No, Veda, you really need to go to the doctor. And ask the doctor if it's wise for you to be taking the Pill, if you're having symptoms like that."

"Ok, well I was hoping for some sympathy, at least," said Veda, even though she knew she wouldn't get any. "Can I come to breakfast with you and dad? I'm really hungry."

"Sure," said Mama. "But make a doctor's appointment first."

Tato drove them to the Tick Tock, right on Route 3, in the family stationwagon, and they approached the door of the diner, the family's reflection marking the shiny, mirrored exterior of the building.

"I still remember baby Veda here in her baby carriage when she was small," said Johnny, the host. Johnny was a tall, skinny man with a large gut that didn't match his wiry limbs. He had thick, black hair that protruded at least two gelled inches from his scalp and a silver belt buckle with a Tick Tock clock replica. Veda imagined a baby carriage and wished she could remember what it was like to be pushed by her parents, observing the world from the safety of her blanketed vehicle.

Johnny left three thick, plastic menus and one computer printout of daily specials on the table. The sound of the plastic as it hit the Formica surface made Veda jump.

"Why are you carrying that pharmacy book, by the way?" Asked Veda's dad.

"It's for Theo, in case I see him."

"Oh, how is Theo?"

"He's good, still buried in schoolwork. He forgot this book at our house so I have to give it to him later." Veda held up the thick textbook, which she placed next to her on the booth seat. She hoped Tato wouldn't ask about when the last time Theo had been to their house. The truth was that her parents hadn't seen Theo in a few weeks, but he didn't seem to notice.

"I'm glad to hear that you're dating such an ambitious guy. Those pharmacy school students get lucrative jobs."

“Yeah, but he’s so busy all the time, and he talks about work a lot. Sometimes I’d rather not know about the things he studies. Like side effects for medicine, for example. He likes to tell me those.”

“You want the usual?” Asked Sally the waitress, not even bothering to pull out her pencil and writing pad, half of its sheets folded over the top, from the front of her black smock. The three of them nodded. Sally already had the coffee pot in hand and poured everyone a cupful. Veda studied Sally and noticed that her stomach was protruding under her waitress apron. Her breasts looked larger too.

“Won’t you sit down with us for a few minutes and have some coffee?” Asked Mama. “It’s not too busy, and we haven’t seen you in ages.”

“I would, but I can’t drink coffee,” said Sally. “I’m pregnant.”

Veda thought how horrible it would be to be pregnant, work a job where you have to stay on your feet all day, live off of tips, and worry about what it would be like to raise a child on your own. She didn’t see a ring on Sally’s finger so she assumed that she would be alone, but maybe she was wrong. Also, her tiny waitress uniform was not very forgiving, and Veda imagined that Sally’s Friday and Saturday night tips from horny, drunk men would not be as plentiful, given Sally’s large belly. Had Sally not ever heard of birth control?

Veda, still an unmarried student, had no idea what she would do if she found out that she was pregnant. Would she abort it? She would like to think she wouldn’t, but she wasn’t sure. She was grateful for the Pill.

Veda wrapped her hands around the warm coffee mug and leaned in close to the steam. If she were alone, she would probably press the warm mug against her lower

abdomen, which felt bloated, radiating, and tangled, like the jungle gym her parents recently removed from the backyard and sold, despite the fact that Veda hadn't used it in at least ten years. Her stomach hurt now and felt like it was cramping so she excused herself. Veda wanted to check on her tampon and possibly change it.

On the fake marble counter in the bathroom was a pile of free pamphlets titled "Catholic Truths and Popular Fictions." Each booklet was a staple-bound, pocket-size guide printed on neon yellow computer paper. Someone must have assembled these guides by hand because each cover had a hand-drawn picture of a cross. The ink from the marker had seeped through the paper.

The pamphlets reminded her of the mass programs they used to have in high school. Since they only went to mass on special days, the secretary in the principal's office would photocopy themed booklets on colored pastel paper. They were hastily stapled and gave Veda papercuts if she wasn't careful holding them. She would usually bring a pen to those masses and find a seat next to Madsy so that they could use the pamphlet as a way to have a conversation without talking.

She took one pamphlet into the stall with her and placed it on the ledge, on top of the toilet paper dispenser. She pulled down her jeans and her panties and reached under herself to pull the tampon string as if it were a trigger for a grenade that she was about to set off. She was a little nervous. Nothing exploded, thankfully, she thought, but the tampon was saturated with blood. She inserted one that she had in her purse, readjusted her clothes, and looked into the toilet. She noticed thick blood and discharge now, pea-sized spots of matter and pieces of floating scraps that looked like torn, red tissue paper.

She put the toilet seat down, flushed the debris, and rested for a few minutes, wondering what could be wrong with her. She flipped through the pamphlet to distract herself, almost cutting her fingers on the rough edges. Halfway through was an illustration of a baby and the following text: *We believe that life begins when sperm and egg meet. The pharmaceutical industry believes that life begins after fertilization, during implantation. When they say that the Pill does not cause abortions, they lie. Sometimes the Pill, especially the low-dose Pill, fails to prevent an egg's release, and sperm that enters a woman's body can fertilize the egg. When the hormones make the uterus an inhospitable place for the fertilized egg, an abortion occurs.*

As she read the birth control information in the pamphlet, Veda re-imagined the process those artists had illustrated in Theo's textbook. She never knew that some versions of the Pill, especially the kind that she was taking, did not always prevent an egg's release. Because Veda and Theo didn't use condoms anymore, fertilization was possible, if an egg had been released. She remembered the picture of the sperm violently burrowing into the egg and felt betrayed. Did that happen inside her own body?

She wondered if what was floating in the toilet were the beginnings of a baby that she had unknowingly aborted, the sperm and egg and the lining floating there in the water. But the evidence was gone now. She stuffed the pamphlet in her purse.

When she returned to the table, the food was waiting. Veda suddenly had no appetite. She looked down at her own scrambled eggs and didn't think that they were funny. She made a smiley face with ketchup and realized that she was too preoccupied to amuse herself. She was not sure why she had ordered them, other than the fact that she always ordered them. Her dad's chicken-egg omelette confused her even more, with the

pieces of ground chicken in the egg, she didn't think they made any sense, and she suddenly felt nauseous. She didn't know if this was from blood loss or thinking too much.

Tato flipped through the selections on the miniature jukebox attached to their table and placed one quarter into the machine, playing a song that Veda had never heard before. Mama started to hum and sway in her seat.

"I remember when this song came out," said Tato. "Your mother and I were having a picnic in a park, talking about whether or not we were ready to have a child. Little did we know, Veda, your mom was already pregnant with you."

"Weren't you afraid? I mean, you didn't even have a chance to plan it and then came me."

"That's just what happened. A lot of women didn't want to use the Pill because it had just been invented and the side effects were horrible," said Mama. "Ask Theo about it, I'm sure he knows. I tried it for a little while, but then I gained a lot of weight so I didn't think it was worth it."

When they were done, she stood up from the table and looked twice at a thick, red smudge staining the pleather material of the seat. More than likely, the spot was dried ketchup, but she felt her own face redden and hoped no one else noticed.

After breakfast, Tato dropped off Veda at the doctor's office and then brought Mama to work. In Dr. Girard's office, the receptionist, who had a nametag that said Caroline, was pregnant. Why was everyone pregnant, Veda wondered? When Veda walked up to the front desk, she could see that Caroline's breasts were hanging over it, and she had trouble fitting her body there because her tummy was so large. When

Caroline stood up to find Veda's file and check her health insurance information, one of the doctors in the practice had to walk in large swooping movements around her, and Caroline bumped into the copy machine.

Veda felt sorry for Caroline, whose body would probably never fully recover from the pregnancy. But what did Veda know? Maybe Caroline wanted to become soft and matronly. All Veda was sure of was that she was not ready to lose her body and sacrifice it for a child.

Veda thought it was disgusting, too, how pregnant women ate. On the desk, Caroline had unfolded a wax paper wrapped breakfast sandwich and unpacked what was nearly a tub of hash browns from the local fast food restaurant. Caroline's pregnant body had overflowed itself, like an unruly soufflé baking in an oven, but she seemed to meticulously maintain everything else: her nails, her hair, her wardrobe, and her makeup. Caroline's two-carat engagement ring caught the light when she waved Veda over to the door that would let her into the examination rooms. Still, Veda thought her belly was disgusting and sloppy.

"Please undress and put on the paper gown that's lying on the examination table. Dr. Girard will be with you in a few minutes."

Veda did what Caroline said and was glad she had brought an extra pair of panties for after the examination because hers were already soiled, even with the heavy-duty tampon she had just put in an hour before. The room was cold, and she sat on the examination table, folding the paper gown under her butt, worried that she would bleed all over the table.

She was both nervous and excited to tell Theo about the result of this meeting with the doctor, and she wondered how he would react. Knowing Theo, he would probably want to use condoms from now on, which would annoy Veda. But maybe now he would pay attention to her. He would be concerned for her well-being and want to try to make everything better. He would ask her more about her emotions and her concerns, and maybe this scare would bring them closer as a couple.

Examination room number three was in the corner of the suite on the second floor of the medical building and had an advantageous view of the park across the street. Today, the view disturbed her: balloons, children with balloons, balloons attached to carriages, balloons leaving children's hands and floating off into the sky until they were no more than a colorful speck among the clouds. The stupid Pill, she thought, was no bigger than the colorful speck in the sky. And the specks, she knew they broke eventually.

Dr. Girard entered the room while reading Veda's chart.

"So you're bleeding and it's not time for your period?" Asked Dr. Girard.

"Yes, since this morning. I know breakthrough bleeding can be normal, but this is violent and particularly messy," said Veda. "Sorry, I don't mean to be disgusting."

"I deal with the disgusting," said Dr. Girard. "Medications?"

"Just the Pill, that's all."

"Is there a chance you could be pregnant?"

"I mean, I don't know. I take the Pill consistently. I've never missed one."

She thought about the pills, all five hundred of them that she had ingested, since she had first starting taking birth control, and thought about how those hormones built up in her body.

“You know it’s not one hundred percent effective, right?”

“Well yeah, of course. There’s always a chance then, yes, maybe, I don’t know. What’s your definition of pregnant? Because I read something today that made me wonder.”

She pulled the “Catholic Truths” paper pamphlet from her purse. She opened to the page with the information and held it out for the doctor, who looked at it skeptically.

“See? Here it says that the pill doesn’t always prevent an egg from being released. Do you think I could have gotten pregnant and had a miscarriage because of the low-dose hormones? Did they kill the fertilized egg? Is that what this is?”

Veda felt relieved that she could finally express what she thought had been wrong with her, even though she knew it was probably a crazy and convoluted diagnosis.

“We practice medicine here, not religion,” Said Dr. Girard, who took the pamphlet from Veda, crumpled it into a ball, and threw it into the trashcan. Veda shivered under her paper gown. She didn’t want to ask the doctor anything more.

“I know what you’re thinking, but you can’t trust literature that hasn’t been written by medical professionals. I’m sure you’re fine. We can give you a blood test to check the levels of the hormones in your body, but you can check for pregnancy yourself, with a home pregnancy test.”

“If I was pregnant within the past twenty-four hours, would the test be positive?”

“Yes, but you should be more concerned about whether you’re pregnant now, not whether you were recently.”

“But why would I be pregnant now?” Veda asked, confused. “I thought the Pill was supposed to protect me from that.”

“Because the Pill isn’t one hundred percent effective.”

“But I don’t want to be pregnant,” said Veda, confused.

The doctor prepared the needle and vial and stuck Veda in the arm.

“Here’s a super pad,” said Dr. Girard, holding a sanitary napkin to her. “You’re fine, Veda. We should have the results in a few days, and they probably won’t tell me anything I don’t already suspect.”

The doctor asked Veda if she had any more questions, and when Veda didn’t respond, she left the room to let Veda dress. When the doctor closed the door, Veda fished the pamphlet out of the garbage can, smoothed the paper on the examination table, refolded it, and put it in her purse.

She dressed and shook a little bit, holding her hips and pressing her fingers into her abdomen, which burned. She wanted to know that something was wrong so she could explain to Theo what she had gone through and give him a reason to care. She couldn’t wait for the blood test results from Dr. Girard. She rushed out of the waiting room and ran down the three flights of stairs to the pharmacy on the first floor.

She found Caroline at the pharmacy too, buying a chocolate bar. She was flirting with the cashier in between his customers so it would be impossible to buy anything without her noticing. She saw Caroline lean over the counter, Caroline’s swollen breasts brushing the plastic container filled with travel-sized nail files, from where she stood by

the large freezer with the bags of ice. Veda was disgusted, by Caroline's protruding belly and also by the way she flirted with the young man, blatantly, not even attempting to hide her engagement ring.

She found the Family Planning aisle and made sure that she was out of Caroline's view. The shelf of pregnancy tests held boxes of different colors. She had never imagined herself buying a pregnancy test. Perhaps at another time in her life, she would choose the most expensive one and want everyone in the store to know the possibility that she might be pregnant. But today Veda did not feel that way. She chose the least expensive one and hoped that cost had little to do with accuracy. Caroline was still standing by the counter.

Veda stuffed the cardboard box under her shirt before anyone could see what she was doing. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror-covered pillar at the end of the aisle and wondered if her own stomach looked larger than before, but the cardboard box under her shirt distorted her figure. She went to the back of the store to the swinging door with the peek-through window to the stockroom. She pushed against the employee bathroom door and found it open, and she slipped behind it and closed the lock, relieved to have found such luck.

She dropped her purse in the corner and removed the box from under her shirt. She unfolded the many creased instruction sheet and scanned the directions for the most important information and hoped she didn't miss anything important. She tried to remember anything funny about the instructions so that she could tell Theo later, when the whole mess was over, but there was nothing particularly funny.

Veda rested the opened cardboard box on the commercial toilet paper dispenser and ripped the plastic wrapper that held the wand. She tried her best to hold the wand under her urine stream and counted “One Mississippi...” up to five, the way she learned to do in preschool, pulls the stick out of the stream, and stared at the wet stick. She didn’t know any other way to accurately count seconds. Only one line materialized. Meaning negative. Now what, she thought.

She stood there for a few more minutes, waiting for the other line, which would generate a plus sign. Nothing happened. She gathered everything: the wrapper, the box, and the pregnancy test and threw them in the trash can. Veda no longer cared if anyone found her with the stolen merchandise. She thought about saving the instructions to show Theo proof of what she did, but they were not really of any use anymore.

On her way out, she saw the pharmacists in their white coats behind the pharmacy counter and remembered that she had forgotten Theo’s textbook at the diner, in the rush of wondering whether or not she had bled on the leather seat. She felt horrible that she had done this. Now, instead of listening to her story and offering her sympathy, Theo would just be annoyed that she had lost his book. She let this whole fiasco distract her from what was really important in her life.

She drove back to the diner and parked in the parking lot, which was crowded since it was still lunch hour. She couldn’t find a parking spot and swung her car around the back. When she got out of her car, she heard two voices, a man’s and a woman’s arguing behind a dumpster, and Veda decided to see what was wrong.

“You know you can’t take breaks right now, since it’s lunch hour. We are short on staff,” said Jimmy angrily.

“I’m sorry, I was feeling nauseous and needed some fresh air!” Screamed Sally.
“Could you at least have some sympathy?”

“I know you’re pregnant, but I have a business to run,” said Jimmy.

Just as Veda had suspected, Sally’s pregnancy was making work difficult for her. Veda had never been behind the diner before, despite having visited so many times. This part of the parking lot was unkempt; the ground showed potholes and was covered with colorful soda cans. By the dumpster, rusted shopping carts with bent wheels, missing plastic hand-grips and tilted carriages had gathered.

Veda heard Sally stomp away angrily, and her heart raced when she realized that she would be caught. Without any better ideas, Veda decided to climb into the shopping cart and crouched down, hiding in it, even though anyone could see into the spaces between the steel bars. She stayed as motionless as she could and cursed herself for choosing a hiding place without any escape. Where could she go from there?

Veda thought of the scene that her mom had described over breakfast: Baby Veda in the carriage, bumping over the sidewalk. But no one was around to push her. She was stuck, and the cart rolled a little, crackling over the rocks beneath the wheels.

“What is that? Who’s there?” Asked Sally, startled.

Veda must have been in shadow because Sally didn’t notice her. Veda was happy, at least, that she didn’t have a lot to carry and was able to jump into the cart so freely and that her body was small and lithe and could maneuver small spaces. In her purse, all she had was the Catholic pamphlet, her car keys, and her wallet. She could rest in the cart for a while, until Sally and Jimmy were safely out of sight.

Veda may have been trapped for the time being, but she was relieved anyway. The situation was risky, but Theo's textbook was still in the diner, and she had to get it, she had to get it for Theo, who might make time for her later and would need his book.

The Prescribed Burn

Veda was finally home, in the bedroom where she grew up, on the second floor of a brick house on a hilly, tree-lined street in suburban New Jersey. She could no longer hear the constant noise of college campus life, the buzz of roommates and people walking to and from class and bars. The quiet made her realize that she had been alone all along. Was she supposed to feel transformed now that she had graduated college?

An entire summer lay before her, and she had no responsibilities, as of now. In the fall she would commute from home to grad school, to pursue a degree in Studio Art. She might try to find a part-time job, work on her portfolio, and reconnect with her old friends. But all that really mattered to Veda was now being closer to Theo, who might give her another chance, since she was no longer so far away. At the same time, Veda didn't know if he would really want her back, and the summer was too precious to waste on waiting.

Tato helped her carry the cardboard boxes filled with her clothes and shoes up to her bedroom. Her parents had decorated Veda's room for her, and she was surprised when she saw the helium-filled mylar balloons, streamers, and *Congratulations!* banner on the wall. She leaned her framed diploma against her desk and imagined that it would sit there for quite some time, given the lack of space on the walls for anything except her

favorite pieces of art: reproductions of Matisse paintings, woodcut art by Ukrainian artists, and the random posters and photos that she had collected from her visits to New York City.

On the nightstand next to her bed, in the bottom of the pile under her art theory books, was Theo's pharmacy textbook, which she had never returned because they broke up before she had the chance to do so. She had never liked looking at the book because all the diagnoses and medical information made her wonder about all things that could be wrong with her. However, she kept it, just in case Theo ever decided that he wanted it back, ever wanted her back. She couldn't keep the thing forever, she thought. Either Theo would have to retrieve it or she would have to get rid of it.

But Theo was so averse to seeing her after the break-up that it wasn't even worth it to him to get his book; he told her that he was worried he might remember why he had cared about her in the first place, and Veda could not understand how that made any sense. Without him, at least, Veda felt more sane. Sure, she missed him, but Theo was confusing.

Veda sat on the rug in the middle of the room, so that the tops of the boxes were level with her ponytail. She noticed how much softer her rug felt than the scratchy, stained, iron-burned carpet in her dorm room. Her room smelled familiar and fresh, cool like crisp spring air and sweet like the rose-scented candle she always burned when she was home; it was completely unlike the smell in her dorm, which always felt heavy, poorly ventilated, and a lot like whatever her roommates were cooking, usually scrambled eggs or garlic pasta or prepackaged cookie dough. What she missed most she

had now: the full access to her art supplies and inspiration boxes, filled with fabric scraps, beads, and other found items.

Veda thought that she would be happy and relieved to be home, finally; she had been happy every other time, every other summer, winter, Easter, and Thanksgiving break. Home had been a reprieve, a getaway, a place where she could come to recuperate. But now that she was here, now that there was no longer any chance to leave, like leaving a vacation destination, she wasn't sure anymore. Veda felt like she was at a retirement party, like this was the end. But it wasn't the end, was it?

She opened one of the boxes and began to unpack. On top of her jeans was a t-shirt that Theo had left her and that she had conveniently forgotten to return because she had wanted to keep it, unsure of when she would see him next. Unlike the textbook, which smelled like ink and paper, the t-shirt still kind of smelled like Theo, like humidity, beer, and sweetness. She pressed the cotton against her face and tried to breathe in what she could, meanwhile angry with herself for holding on to sentimental objects. Veda was never going to get over Theo if she kept his things close to her, but she wasn't sure if she wanted to get over him just yet. The memory was still so fresh.

In the morning, Veda woke to an empty house. With the rush of graduation and coming home, and the familiarity of her unconventional college schedule, she had forgotten that it was Monday. She should have been in Advanced Sculpture class, but instead she was in her bedroom, which somehow unearthed more emotion than she thought was possible. Everything reminded her of something from her past, of things she hadn't even thought about for a while, like the slumber parties she had with Madsy in high school, all the time she had spent sitting on the floor, painting, and the night she

snuck Theo to her room even though boys weren't allowed. Even if she wanted to get over Theo, she thought, her bedroom allow it.

She knew Theo was home too, probably lying in his bed in his parent's house in New York. She was now finally living closer to him than she had since he was also still a student at her college. Veda rolled over and smothered her face in the pillow, and she noticed a short brown hair on her sheet, which had to be Theo's. She hadn't yet lived enough life in this bedroom to forget about Theo, the way she had managed to do at school, where she was busy and had her friends. She didn't really know what she should be feeling, and missing Theo was the easiest thing to do.

There was no way she was going to spend the rest of the day, or the week, miserable, so she opened her cell phone and called Madsy.

"I made it home," said Veda, when Madsy answered. Veda could tell that Madsy had just woken up too, because her voice sounded husky.

"Why are you calling me so early?" Asked Madsy.

"I wanted to make sure you weren't doing anything," said Veda. "It's only nine, and I've already spent too much time in my head. Do you want to come over and tan?"

"Too early to tan," said Madsy. "I'll come over at noon. Can you remain mentally stable until then?"

"I'll try, but noon is my breaking point, so don't be late," said Veda.

She got out of bed and went over to her inspiration box, a cardboard box that Madsy had decorated for her in high school. It was covered with pictures of glamorous women from magazines and words that she had clipped from old books, even whole lines from books she had gotten from the library book swap. Madsy had given her the box as a

high school graduation present, and Veda had laughed when she got it because she realized that Madsy had actually learned something from all the decoupage lessons Veda had given her in Sister Mary's art class.

Veda dug her hands into the compartment with the beads and let the cool spheres roll over the tips of her fingertips. If she really wanted to get over Theo, she thought, she could totally immerse herself in art supplies. The sensation of the beads on her skin was more familiar to her than the body of any man. She moved her fingers over the scraps of paper and fabric and even let one scrap her finger a little so that it stung. She liked the feeling because it was familiar; she associated the paper cuts with creation, which never really hurt, at least not physically. She had no idea if she would ever be able to kiss Theo again, but her art supplies provided her with tactile release, and she could turn to them whenever she wanted; they would always be available.

Did she even want to kiss Theo again? Would it feel the same as before? Veda pulled some colored scraps out of the box and also some tubes of acrylic paint. She chose colors that appealed to her mood at the moment, blue and purple, and grey, and she arranged them in random fashion on her rug. She wasn't sure what to make of this collection, but she knew she wanted to make something. She was waiting for an idea to come to her, and this waiting made her feel violently connected to her life.

In the same way that she waited for the colors and shapes to make sense to her, she decided to wait for Theo to call her, for him to tell her that he wanted her because she was sick of meddling in things that were uninspired, sick of being the one taking initiative when the circumstances just didn't seem right. She was going to release control of the situation. Art, like love, sometimes created itself.

By the time Veda knew it, Madsy was ringing the doorbell of the house, and Veda had made nothing out of the materials on her floor. When Veda got to the front door, Madsy was standing on the front steps in her bikini top and gym shorts, holding a towel under her arm and a tote bag in her other hand. Veda hadn't seen her friend since January; she looked thinner, and her black, wavy hair looked neater, like she had recently had it trimmed. Veda noticed the sexy style of Madsy's bathing suit, which was a little much for sunbathing on a deck with a friend, but she smiled to herself because her friend was the same as she had remembered.

"Congratulations!" Madsy explained, rushing inside and hugging Veda, who was still wearing her clothes from the day before. Madsy didn't finish her degree yet; she still had a few credits to complete, which meant she would be taking classes through the summer but also living with her parents to save money. "Why were you so down this morning when you called? You're finally home."

"That's the problem," said Veda. "I'll explain to you on the deck. Let me change, and I'll meet you outside."

In their backyard, Veda's parents had a large, wooden deck, which jutted out onto the grass from a sliding door in their kitchen. The view from the deck included a backyard filled with garden statues and, beyond the terra cotta gnomes, a thick forest. Veda had sometimes played there as a child, and she knew all the paths, which lead to another part of town that was being developed for houses and a recreational center. In addition to a table, two lounge chairs filled the space of the deck. All they could hear were the rustling of the trees and the birds chirping, but Veda still wasn't used to the quiet, which made her nervous.

Because it was the middle of May, the air was still a little cold, but the sky was completely cloudless. Madsy covered one of the chairs with her towel, and Veda covered her own. They began the arduous process of coating themselves with greasy tanning oil, an art which they had perfected. Veda's finger stung from where the paper had cut her, and she had a hard time applying the oil without wincing. She watched Madsy as she seemed to pose. Madsy rested her head on the back of her hand and pushed her hair back with her sunglasses. Veda was always jealous of Madsy's confidence. Madsy knew how to use her body to its fullest advantage.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," said Veda, when Madsy rolled over on her stomach and untied the strings of her bathing suit top. Veda hated the false sense of privacy and security that the suburbs gave everyone, including herself. "Last summer I was out here, just like this, and two strange men came into the backyard. Apparently they were gutter-cleaning employees, and they were looking for the hose connection. I had to wrap a towel around myself and waddle to the side of the house to show them. It was really embarrassing."

"Whatever," said Madsy. "Don't ever feel embarrassed. If anything, *they* should have felt embarrassed knowing that they couldn't have someone as sexy as you."

"I don't think it works that way, Mads," said Veda. "If I'm so sexy, how come I still haven't heard from Theo? I don't think I'm going to hear from him ever again. I just have to get used to being here without him, I guess. I have to make new memories."

"Is that why you're so bummed? Are you seriously still stuck on that jerk?"
Asked Madsy. "Theo should mean nothing to you."

“It’s going to take a while. He really got my hopes up when he said we might be able to try again once I moved back home,” said Veda. “I’m still not even sure that I am ready to move forward. It’s summer, you know? Summer is the best time for a lover.”

“Screw that. I have a good story to tell you that will take your mind off the Theo nonsense.” Said Madsy.

“I’d appreciate it. I’ve been trying to get my mind off of him for months. I was doing alright at school, with all the work and distractions, but now I’ve totally lost it.”

“I went to a yoga instructor certification camp a few weeks ago. Did I tell you? I don’t think I did,” said Madsy. Veda knew that Madsy had always loved yoga. She had been the one to coach Veda through yoga poses when she was trying to become more flexible in preparation to lose her virginity to Arthur. She was the one who would tell Veda how to breathe if she ever felt like she was going to have a panic attack.

“Shit, you’re going to love this. You’re not allowed to mention Theo though, at all, not for the rest of the day.”

“Okay, I won’t mention him. Doesn’t mean I won’t be thinking about him. But you can try to distract me. Tell me the story.”

“I met a guy,” said Madsy.

“Of course you met a guy,” said Veda, adjusting herself in the chair, resting her arms on the armrests and fixing her hair so that her bun wouldn’t press into the back of her head. She wished she had brought some magazines outside, but at this point it was too late to go back into the house, greased up as she was. Instead, Veda covered her face with another towel so that the sun wouldn’t bother her eyes and so that she could focus

fully on Madsy's story, which she hoped would amuse her and take her mind off Theo.

"So let's hear it."

"Okay, so this workshop, it was at the Jacob Javitts Center, in one of the classrooms they have in the basement," said Madsy. "When I got there, he was the first person I saw. Tall, broad shoulders, wearing a five o'clock shadow at eight in the morning. So fucking sexy. He was standing behind a table with a clipboard, checking people in."

"Sounds hot," said Veda, trying her best to imagine the situation. At first she was sad because Madsy's description made Veda think of Theo's broad shoulders and facial hair, but she forced herself to place herself in Madsy's story. She had been having trouble paying attention to people lately anyway, because her mind was always somewhere else. If she was going to give her best friend her full attention, she would have to forget about Theo, for the moment at least.

"He immediately caught my eye because he was totally unlike the other guys that were hanging around," said Madsy. "I mean, you know yoga guys. They are usually scrawny and skinny, and they look kind of like doofuses.

Anyway, I go up to him and ask him where I need to go and what I need to do, and I see his nametag: *Ramón*. So he tells me that I will need to go to room 111A for the orientation speech and that I will have to choose a partner for workshop.

I look around at most of the other people waiting to sign in and, you would have been surprised, most of the people are old and out of shape. They have these lumpy, misshapen bodies, and I think, there's no way I'm going to work with these people."

Veda had never realized that Madsy was so judgmental about people's bodies, especially since Veda knew that Madsy had her own problems with body image. She looked down at her own belly to make sure it was flat and saw that it was smooth and glistening, covered with the oil. She thought about the way Theo would sometimes, when he was in a good mood, kiss Veda's tummy and tell her how beautiful it was, but she had to remind herself that those memories couldn't matter to her because they were so inconsistent. Veda moved the towel up to her forehead and allowed her eyes to adjust to the sunlight, which was now beating down from directly overhead. She had to concentrate on Madsy's story.

"So what did you do?"

"I ask him, all flirty, well, Ramón, how do I choose a partner? And he says that he is free, if I am interested."

"Provocative and also quite stereotypical. Was that really his name?" Asked Veda. With the towel no longer on her face, she began to smell smoke. She assumed that one of the neighbors was grilling something for lunch. The scent was pretty strong and was less like burning charcoal and more like burning trees. She was reminded of the sticks and logs they burned once at summer camp, at the *vatras*. "Do you smell that?"

"Yeah, it's making me hungry," said Madsy, pointing to the grill, which stood in the corner of the deck, by the table. "Want to make something for lunch? Do you have any propane in that thing?"

"Are you serious? I don't think we even have food. My parents don't really cook anymore," said Veda, hoping that Madsy would forget her impulse. Veda wasn't hungry, and she really wasn't in the mood to eat. She had spent the previous week drinking at

least one beer every night and indulging in two desserts, one to celebrate her last dinner with her roommates and another when her parents took her to the fanciest restaurant in DC. She was spending this week on a diet, in case Theo decided to call her. She had to look her best for him, and she absolutely had to prove to him that she was alright on her own. “Anyway, it doesn’t smell like food. It smells like trees.”

“I don’t know. Anyway, so I tell Ramón that we can be partners. And once he’s done checking everyone in, we go to the room where we start with the warm-up poses. One person does the pose, and the other person observes. So I go first, and I can tell he is loving my downward dog.”

“That’s gross. Did he start to drool?”

“Basically. And from that pose I can see into the mesh pocket of his backpack, which is sitting next to him on the floor. Full of condoms. Like jam-packed, I’m telling you.”

Veda started to laugh, and she could feel her greasy forearms slide over the armrests on her chair. She thought about how difficult it had been to ween Theo off of condoms, and she missed his protestations, which made her feel like she had so much power and control. She wasn’t looking forward to ever using condoms again, whenever that would be, and hoped Theo would come back to her, if only for the simple reason that they had already had unprotected sex and had decided it was okay.

While she laughed, Veda could feel her rear end sink into the chair. Her butt broke the tight weave of plastic fibers, and she fell almost completely through the chair, just above the wooden floor of the deck. Maybe she really had overdone it so much the past week and gained so much weight that the chair couldn’t hold her. And, she worried

about how mad her parents would be when they came home and found one of their expensive lounge chairs broken. Now Madsy was laughing.

“Oh, are you okay?” Madsy asked, trying to stifle her giggles.

“Wow, how did that happen?” Asked Veda. “Did I really get that fat?”

“It’s probably just because no one has sat on these for a while. All the temperature and weather changes really fuck with the material, you know?”

“My parents are not going to be happy about this,” said Veda, standing up to avoid any further damage. She sat down on the end of Madsy’s lounge chair, by her feet.

“Calm down,” said Madsy. “Just say an animal chewed through it or something. You basically live in the wilderness. They’ll believe it.”

Veda adjusted herself on Madsy’s chair, hoping that the two of them wouldn’t break the other chair too. Veda’s arm brushed Madsy’s leg, and their two limbs slipped against each another, greasy from the tanning oil. Madsy’s skin, from the brief encounter she had with it, was so unlike Theo’s skin, which pulled closely around his bones and muscles and was covered with dark hair. Madsy’s skin was soft and nice to touch and actually made Veda desire Theo, simply because the feeling of Madsy’s skin was so foreign, and Veda wanted something familiar.

Veda had to stop this, she thought. She had to stop thinking about Theo because she wasn’t sure there was any way they could be together, even now. Veda squinted her eyes and saw clouds, in a sky that had previously been cloudless. But the masses were dark and definitely looked like smoke, which would explain why Veda had smelled it. She became very afraid and wondered why the forest behind her house was burning.

“Okay, do you see that? I told you something was burning.”

“Oh, it’s probably nothing though. Wouldn’t we be hearing firetrucks by now?”

“True,” said Veda. “Okay, keep telling me the story so that I can stop thinking about everything else. And I want to know what he did with all those condoms.”

“Well, basically we are partners all day. He touches me a few times, to adjust my posture, and I am completely charged. He really turns me on,” said Madsy. Veda sort of remembered what it was like to feel completely charged by someone, by Theo, but that feeling seemed so far behind her that she didn’t know how it could have been possible in the first place. Had she dreamt it? How could anyone in the world make her feel that way?

“I can tell he isn’t really boyfriend material, just based on the condoms, but I can’t stop thinking about how much I want to try some of those poses with him in private.”

“You did not just say that,” said Veda.

“Oh, I did, and after the workshop, he invites me to the juice bar with him so that we can get smoothies.”

“What the hell is burning?” Asked Veda. “What is that? That can’t be normal.”

“It’s okay,” said Madsy, turning over on her back to face Veda. Madsy started breathing the way that she wanted Veda to breathe when Veda became nervous, and Veda got the hint. Veda breathed in through her nose, pushing her stomach out and opening her diaphragm. Yuck, she thought, that made her look fat. She breathed out through her mouth, releasing all the tension. Madsy was reminding Veda to calm down. After eight years as Veda’s best friend, Madsy understood when Veda was panicking.

Veda wondered if she was somehow being punished for the bad thoughts she had about her home and for her hatred of her home's ability to inspire such gnawing nostalgia. She wondered if the fire would burn down her parent's house, destroying everything that bothered her and giving her more important things to worry about than Theo.

"So anyway, after the juice bar, Ramón invites me back to his hotel room. He is just staying temporarily for the workshop. Did I tell you that part?" Asked Madsy. "He actually travels a lot, doing private workshops with his high-profile clients. Athletes, celebrities, rich yoga fanatics, you know."

"Weren't you afraid to go back to a hotel room with someone you didn't know?" Asked Veda. "I mean, you knew what would happen."

Veda wondered what it might be like to be alone with Theo again. She didn't think that she would actually feel comfortable, especially knowing that Theo didn't really want to see her. She would need someone else to be there with her or meet him in a crowded place, in a busy restaurant. Veda was sure that if she were to call Theo right then and ask him to have sex with her, for old times sake, he would agree, fuck her, and then afterward make some comment about making sure Veda didn't get under his skin. Veda liked the idea of attracting Theo's attention, but the aftermath was not worth it.

"I feel pretty comfortable with him," said Madsy. "We are touching all day, and I knew what I am getting into, emotionally. I just think it would be fun. Also, the ginseng in my smoothie makes me hyper."

Veda could understand that. Exercising with someone generally made her feel closer to them. She and Theo used to go for long runs together sometimes and then

afterward would collapse into a sweaty mess, which somehow turned them both on, despite the fragrant, wet puddle they would make on Veda's couch or wherever they happened to be. The one thing that always annoyed her though was how much faster he was and how he taunted her. The last few guys Veda met didn't even like exercise, which made her try to accept the fact that she'd be running alone for a while. At least she could run at her own pace.

Veda suddenly had trouble breathing, and she couldn't tell if it was from her inability to do Madsy's breathing exercises, from the smoke, which was still billowing from the trees, or from the breathlessness that she sometimes got when she tried to make sense of the fact that Theo had not called her yet, even though he must have known that she was home.

"So I don't want to get too graphic, because I know you won't approve, but basically Ramón starts kissing me the moment we enter his apartment. It is so immediate," said Madsy. "And then things move to one of the two queen-sized beds in the room, the one he's not sleeping in, of course. He tells me that too. He doesn't want to mess up his bed."

Veda missed the immediacy that Madsy was talking about. Theo and Veda had that sometimes, on good nights, sometimes after a bottle of wine. Even during their worst arguments, when they felt most estranged from and strange to one another, like Madsy and Ramón must have felt that day, Veda and Theo would still be slaves to that spark they had, and he would press her up against whatever wall was closest to them and make full use of it. One lesson that Veda would take from those nights would be not to drink heavily with a guy who wasn't sure what he wanted.

“I’m going to go inside and call my mom and ask her if she knows what’s going on with the smoke,” said Veda, who also wanted to escape the oppressive heat and breathe air-conditioned air. “She always has an answer.”

“Wait, don’t you want to hear the rest of my story?” Asked Madsy. “Anyway, if your mom finds out that you and I have been tanning then she’ll know that you broke the chair.”

“True. Okay, finish,” said Veda, draping the towel over her face. “Did he use one of the condoms?”

“Yeah, I ask him why he has so many, and he gives me some generic response about how he always has to be prepared for anything. Of course. I don’t care, as long as he wraps it up.

So we’re doing it on his bed, and it’s pretty hot but mostly theatrical, you know? He just doesn’t seem genuine and is only interested in impressing himself. I don’t think all the hand waving and hip shaking are for me. I get the impression that he spends a lot of time in front of his mirror, naked, practicing his sex moves. Also, his forehead is really greasy, and I keep staring at the way the gel from his hair seems to be melting onto his face.”

“That’s disgusting. Is that the whole story? We really need to go inside. I hear crackling now. It sounds like trees are crackling and falling, actually. Yes, falling,” said Veda, who sat up straight and used the towel to wipe the grease from her body. Her skin actually stung a little bit, and she wondered if she was burning too. Usually the sunburn didn’t appear for a few hours, after it was too late. “Do you hear that?”

“Yeah, but I don’t hear any sirens,” said Madsy. “And anyway, that’s not the end of my story. It gets better.”

“What could possibly be better than fucking Ramón?” Asked Veda, impatiently.

“Okay, so you’re not going to believe this part,” said Madsy, who took a cue from Veda and began to clean herself with her own towel. “So then he starts to get really into it. And he moves his lips close to my ear and keeps saying these two words over and over again.”

“What the fuck was that?” Asked Veda, noticing a figure in the forest, between the tree trunks. The figure appeared to be wearing something orange and reflective. Veda thought, for just a moment, that it was Theo. Maybe he was coming back, at least to reclaim his textbook. He seemed to be walking closer to them, and Veda saw that the figure was wearing a yellow hard hat, a thick vest, and heavy work pants. Veda wondered if she was losing her mind, now that she was imagining that other men were Theo.

“Over and over, Ramón keeps whispering in my ear *que rico, que rico*, with the rolled ‘r’ and everything, and I just don’t know what to do. After a while, I think I am just going to burst out laughing so I tell him that I speak English and that I have no idea what he is saying,” said Madsy. “Que rrrrrrico. Que rrrrrrico.”

Madsy’s loud moans attracted the attention of the man in the woods, and Veda stood up, ready to run inside.

“Don’t come too close to the trees,” said the man in the forest. “We’re conducting a small prescribed burn to clear some land and make sure the rest of the forest stays healthy.”

“Come on, Madsy,” said Veda, relieved that she finally knew the cause of the smoke. Madsy grabbed her towel and finally followed Veda inside.

“See? It was nothing,” said Madsy. “Anyway, so he keeps saying that, over and over, louder and louder, until he finishes. And then I ask him to go down on me, but he says he’s too tired to continue. What the hell is that about?”

“That’s ridiculous!” said Veda, better able to focus on Madsy since they were inside, away from the smoke. “What a jerk. He could have at least tried to make you come. I wish I could punch him.”

“Yeah, in the end I didn’t really get anything out of it.”

“Don’t ever say that. You got a good story, right?” Veda asked, with her face now pressed up against the glass of the deck window, watching the man stomp through the woods, making sure the fire wasn’t burning out of control. “Listen, I don’t mean to scold you, but you really should have known better.”

“I know,” said Madsy, slumping down into one of the chairs at the kitchen table. “I know. I don’t spend the night, and then I feel shitty afterward. And I have to see him every day for the rest of the week.”

Madsy started to cry, and Veda was surprised because she didn’t realize how upset Ramón had made her friend. She was under the impression that Madsy’s encounter with the yoga instructor was simply a playful fling that hadn’t worked out like she had hoped. Madsy had told the whole story in such a joking way that Veda thought her friend wasn’t much bothered by it, but now Madsy was crying at her parents’ kitchen table, soaking the fabric placemats. In the midst of her own preoccupation with Theo, Veda had neglected to truly realize her best friend’s pain.

“Don’t cry, Mads. He’s a jerk, and you couldn’t have known that he would have treated you that way,” said Veda. “Look, you said you were hungry. Can I make you some lunch?”

Veda went to the refrigerator and found some meat and vegetables they could grill. She motioned for Madsy to wait for her while she ran up to her bedroom and knocked her art theory books on the floor, making an even bigger mess than the unpacked cardboard boxes had made. She picked up Theo’s textbook from her nightstand and told herself that it didn’t matter if he wanted it back, not now. When she returned to the kitchen, she asked Madsy to grab the food and follow her out to the deck.

“Let’s go outside. The man said it was okay, as long as we don’t go too close to the trees. I will grill you some lunch, like you wanted. It will be alright,” said Veda.

“Okay, I’m really hungry,” said Madsy.

The two girls stood there, watching the trees burn. Madsy lit the grill.

“Hey, could you do me a favor?” Veda shouted at the man in the reflective vest. She held the textbook out to him and motioned for him to take it. She needed to let go of one thing, at least.